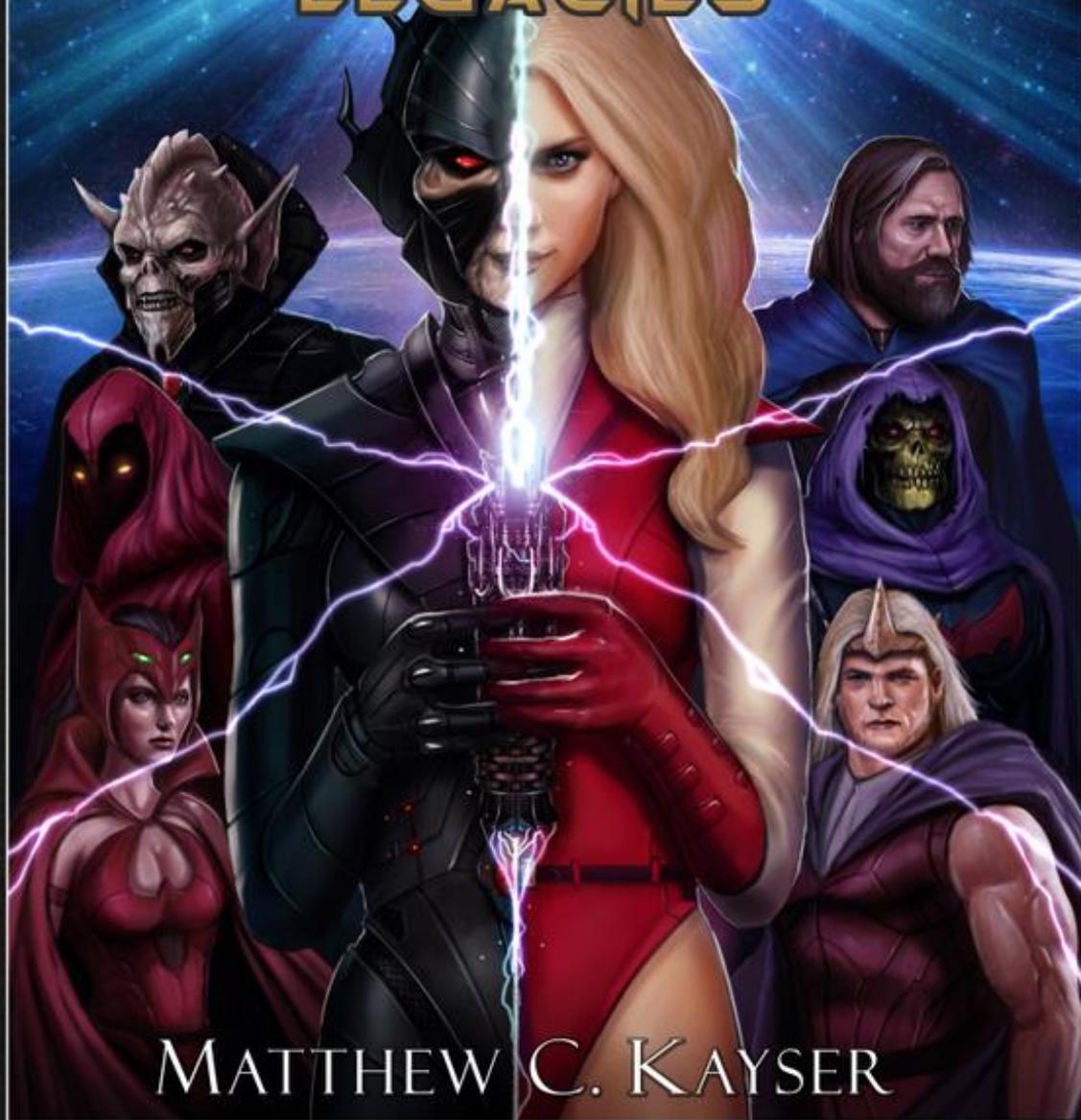


MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE LEGACIES



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1.

THE AWAKENING

“Out!” Miro shouted, the king of Eternia’s voice echoing throughout the massive throne room. “Out with you, foul demon, and take your child with you!” The latest in a line of kings that stretched back dozens of generations, King Miro was tall and broad-shouldered, a trait that ran through his family. This day however, the strength of his physical form did little to hide his inner frailty. His dark brown hair hung to his jaw line, the sweat from his face causing it to cling to him. Normally well-groomed and stoic, the king looked haggard and tired. He had two days worth of stubble and a string of sleepless nights had given his eyes a tired appearance that betrayed his exhaustion.

A young, blue-skinned boy, who had recently celebrated his seventh birthday in this very room, tore himself from his mother’s arms and ran toward the throne. “No, Father!” he cried. “I don’t want to leave! I love you!”

The king bolted upright from where he sat, hastily making his way down the dozen white marble steps that brought him to floor level to meet the child. The dark-haired boy spread his arms for an embrace, but was instead grabbed by his shirt collar and shaken. King Miro glared at the boy’s mother, who stood behind him, before leveling his gaze to the young one’s eyes. “Your mother is a

betrayers, liars and witches, Keldor. You must understand that your only purpose is to take my throne and be her puppet king. No matter the blood we share, you are but a weapon to her, one that I have loved dearly, but have allowed to get far too close to my heart, where it is most deadly. You are no longer my son, Keldor and I'll not allow you live another day in this palace. I cannot risk it."

Keldor felt hot tears stream down his cheeks as the king let him go. He turned back toward his mother Nira and ran to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She pulled her flowing black cloak around him soothingly. Nira's eyes shot daggers at the king as she spoke. "I understand your anger with me, Miro, but our son?"

Miro ran his hands through his hair as he paced the throne room. There were no guards here to see his condition and he was glad for it. If the Gar woman in front of him had wanted him dead, he would already have fallen. Her identity as Nira was a lie. In truth, she was Shokoti, a witch of great power. The mere mention of her name caused battle-hardened soldiers to tremble. Miro held tight to the talisman he wore around his neck for protection as he spoke. Found in the Eternian archives, he prayed that it would protect him. He was usually not the superstitious type, but recent events had changed him. "I cannot trust a single thing from our union, woman. You have used me since the day we first met. Everything that once seemed so pure and true about us I now know was a lie. Surely I do not trust you and what you would use the boy to do."

"You see enemies where there are none," she said in an exasperated tone.

"You know I'm right," he retorted. "I know your true name, Shokoti."

Shokoti smiled, finally acquiescing. She had been found out. Her deception had been discovered and there was no longer any point in trying to maintain it. "Perhaps. But I can see now that that game has played out. Take the boy as an offering of peace, Miro. Raise him as you would any other son. I will not interfere. There is no doubt that you are more of a loving parent than I could ever be. Take him and care for him in a way that I never could."

Miro shook his head quickly. "I cannot trust you. Who knows what evils you have planted in his mind, just awaiting your command? I already have a son on the way. I don't need yours."

She bared her teeth, revealing for the first time the sharp fangs that her magic had hidden from him. Her eyes became an opaque black, as dark as the night sky. "So be it," she replied, "but know that this choice will haunt you for the

rest of your days, Miro.” She pointed at him and raised her voice magically, its sound reverberating throughout the throne room and the king’s bones. “I curse your bloodline. Forever will it be tainted by evil, your household threatened not only from without, but from within. One day this choice will cost you dearly, King Miro, and even your children will lose that which is most precious to them.”

Keldor cried silently as the words and actions of both of his parents cut him to his core. He turned his gaze toward the king, looking for any sign of love in his father's eyes. He saw only anger, despair and regret; regret not for his actions here this day, but for the fact that Keldor had ever been born. Keldor knew, even at his tender age, that he was too young to have to experience the pain of not being wanted. What had he done to deserve this? He'd always been a good boy. Why did they no longer love him? What had he done? The young boy shook in fear as purple smoke rose from his mother's feet and surrounded them. He closed his eyes to the stinging sensation it caused. When they reopened, he was somewhere else entirely.



Skeletor awoke on the hard stone floor of his cell. *Stop thinking about the past*, he told himself silently. *Focus on the here and now*. The cell was small and nondescript, designed to keep one alive, but with little-to-no comfort or amenities. A simple military cot rested against the left wall, a metal bench bolted to the floor across from it. A sink and facilities sat in the open corner. In such a cramped space, there was little to do but reflect. It was not a pastime the skull-faced sorcerer enjoyed. He felt a pain inside of himself, emotional rather than physical, and cursed it. The memories, feelings and emotions he had experienced in his life as Keldor had long been lost to him, but were now reopening like a wound since his confrontation with his brother Randor months before.

Randor had learned that Skeletor was once his half-brother Keldor, and now, due to the former Eternian king's interference, the memories of that life were returning. They came first as small waves, and then flowed like a river. Now, as he felt the cold stone floor beneath him, he knew that a flood was coming. Silently, Skeletor cursed his brother for putting him through this. If Randor hadn't confronted him with his newfound knowledge, he wouldn't be

remembering these things. He'd buried them on purpose. Without Randor's interference, all of this would have remained locked away deep in his subconscious, where he had put it so long ago.

Even stronger than the hatred he felt for Randor was that which he felt for Evil-Lyn. She had betrayed him. He had loved her once, long ago, and now he was being punished for it, much as his father had been punished for loving Keldor's mother Nira, who had secretly been the Gar witch known as Shokoti. In a way, Skeletor felt ashamed. His father Miro had been tricked by Shokoti into thinking she was something other than the witch she was. Skeletor, however, had known exactly what Evil-Lyn was when they'd first met, long before his transformation, and he'd still been foolish enough to fall for her. He should have learned from his father's mistakes. That, at least, was something that he and Randor had in common.

Evil-Lyn, more so than Randor, was the one responsible for the situation Skeletor found himself in, having been the one to expose his long-kept secret to his half-brother. Skeletor swore to himself that if he ever escaped this place his vengeance upon her would be swift and merciless. He moaned slightly, feeling groggy and exhausted. He always had trouble sleeping without complete darkness. Having no eyes to close, he needed the darkness in order to quiet his mind. His cell was brightly lit, as it always was.

"Was that last blow too much for you?" he heard a familiar female voice say.

"I can take whatever you can dish out," he said. "Pain is nothing to me."

"Your mind, perhaps," she replied. "Your body seems to disagree. You blacked out for a moment. Did you dream?"

Skeletor fought to compose himself. He didn't want this girl to know just how out-of-sorts he truly was. As of late his mind was as pained as his body. "No," he answered. "There are no dreams in this place. You know this. Your leader has seen to it. No one within the Fright Zone can dream." Hordak had used a special spell that blocked all magic within the Fright Zone, other than that used by himself and his closest lieutenant, a bizarre woman named Shadow Weaver. This acted as a measure of security for the Horde leader, making it so that no magic-wielding member of the so-called Great Rebellion, and there were a few, could see into his most personal domain. The blocking of all dreams was a side-effect, as dreams were a bit of magic in their own right, but it was a welcome one to the centuries-old sorcerer. A lack of dreams equaled a lack of ambition and hope. Without hope, people became weak. The loss of dreams

within the Fright Zone helped Hordak solidify his already great hold over his army, and by extension, Etheria and its inhabitants.

Skeletor's visitor was clothed in a black and gray bodysuit, a red cape hung regally behind her. Her true face was usually hidden, even from her allies, behind a grotesque mask that made her appear to be of Hordak's race, but she had decided to forgo it and stood before Skeletor with her human characteristics exposed. Skeletor had seen her face when he had first arrived on this planet, when she had been sure that Hordak would kill him. Short blonde hair, bright blue eyes and soft features made Despara what most would consider to be attractive for a human. Little about her genuine appearance would give the impression that she was a ruthless general of the Horde army, a killer with little remorse for her enemies. Despara nodded in response to his answer. "For good reason. My father says dreams are a lie, that they serve no purpose."

"Your father?" Skeletor laughed quietly. "Is that what he says?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation, her expression still and motionless.

He glanced up at her and scoffed before returning his gaze to the stone floor. "Your whole life is a dream, you idiot."

Despara ignored him. A regular visitor for the past several months, she had become used to his insults by now and knew that they were nothing but empty threats. Within the Fright Zone, Skeletor's magic was gone and he held no power over her. She knew she had nothing to fear from him. "But you saw something, didn't you? I can tell by your demeanor, Sorcerer. It affected you."

"Yes," he answered simply.

"If not a dream, then what?"

He sighed; a strange sound coming from the seemingly lifeless skull hidden within its dark hood. "The past. Another life. The memories of a dead man." He hoisted himself up onto his hands and knees, staring at the floor below him. As he did so, he felt her armored boot strike him solidly in the stomach, driving him back down once again, the breath driven from his lungs.

"You should allow him to remain dead, Skeletor. You no longer have any life save for this. No purpose but the pain I bring to you." Despara smiled as she lowered her eyes to his crumpled form. This creature had betrayed her father in the past and now he was Hordak's gift to her. Bringing Skeletor pain brought her pleasure. She kicked him once more, enjoying herself as if she were playing with

her favorite toy. Despara gazed at his hideous skulled visage. After a moment, it turned upward and gazed back with a look she had not seen in any of her dozens of visits to his cell. Even without the ability to change his expression, she could sense that his stare was different this time; deeper and more penetrating.

“Why do you care so much about dreams, Force Captain? You may be able to read me, but I can read you as well, and better than you think. I am no fool. You’ve had dreams, haven’t you? Despite Hordak’s spell that blocks them.” Skeletor saw her mouth twitch slightly at his words. She had been about to speak before she’d stopped herself. “They must be powerful to break through his spell. So tell me, young woman,” he paused, savoring his small victory over her. “What do you dream about?” He laughed as he felt her armored boot strike his skull, sending him to oblivion once more.



Once again masked in her father’s image, Despara exited Skeletor’s cell and made her way purposefully down the long corridor that could have contained so many of The Horde’s enemies. In truth, most of Hordak’s enemies were killed on sight. Skeletor and the Eternian man were in fact the only prisoners kept here, unaware of each other’s fates. Her father preferred it that way. Why he had insisted on keeping these two alive was beyond her, but she did rather enjoy torturing the skull-faced one. Skeletor and Hordak had a history. She could at least understand why her father might be amused at his presence. Why he kept the other, the Eternian, she did not understand. She had not visited him at all since his arrival in the cells. She was disturbed by the fact that the Eternian man believed he was her father. Despara knew that he was simply a fool, but she couldn’t bring herself to see him. Insane or not, there was something about him that made her feel uneasy, as if she were losing herself just by thinking about him. She had enough to worry about with the rebellion against Hordak. She didn’t have the time to deal with the Eternian. Or was that just an excuse? She was losing her sense of self and wasn’t sure whether even her own inner reasoning could be trusted anymore.

Making her way to her personal quarters, Despara realized that it wasn’t just the Eternian that made her feel this way. She hadn’t felt like herself ever since both of the prisoners had first arrived. She enjoyed toying with Skeletor,

but even without his magic, she had to admit that the sorcerer was beginning to get to her. Her visits to the weak-willed creature, which had once been entertaining, were now beginning to wear on her. She was getting too familiar with him, and he with her. He was beginning to see through her, reading her far too easily. His words rang true, no matter how much she fought against it. He was right, she had been having dreams. In them, she stands on a balcony overlooking a beautiful kingdom. She is not here, on Etheria, but rather some far off planet or realm. The sweet smell of spring is in the air, not the foul stench of the Fright Zone and its factories. Birds chirp. A small child cries. She turns and sees a blonde man standing before her. He smiles, a brilliant silver sword clutched in his hands. As the blonde man hands her the sword as a gift, she takes it in her hands and returns his smile before running him through with it.

She'd had the same dream nearly every night since the prisoners' arrival. Each time it varied slightly. Sometimes there were no birds, no child crying, no sound at all, save for the rush of blood in her ears as her heart pounded, awaiting that same, final moment when she murders the man before her with his own sword. That part never changed. What did it mean? Did it mean anything at all? The most striking aspect of the dream itself was the emotion she felt each night when she killed the man. It was one she'd never felt before, especially when dispatching an enemy: regret.



Randor opened his eyes in the familiar darkness. If not for the sensation of the act itself, he wouldn't have even known that they were uncovered. His cell was identical to Skeletor's, though he did not know this. He had no idea, in fact, that Skeletor was still alive. He had had little to no contact with anyone during his time here, his meals brought to him by Horde troopers, who seldom spoke a word to him. The blackness of the room was all encompassing on this day. He felt the cold hard mattress of his cot beneath his hands as he raised himself up into a sitting position, his back against the metal wall. It was then that he noticed the room was not pure darkness, as it often was. As his vision slowly adjusted from his sleep, he saw two red eyes glowing across the room from him and he realized that, in a rare occurrence, he was not alone.

He heard the rustle of cloth as his visitor moved closer to him, the red

eyes seemingly floating of their own accord. "I see you are awake, Randor." The woman's voice was a serpentine hiss. "There is nothing my eyes cannot see in this darkness."

The voice was unmistakable. It belonged to one of the most powerful of Hordak's lieutenants. "Shadow Weaver," Randor said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She laughed slightly. It sounded like air leaking from a pressurized room. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Eternian."

He sighed. "I see that sarcasm has not yet been discovered on this planet."

Shadow Weaver's red eyes blazed brighter momentarily. "You would be wise not to joke with me."

During his time in captivity, Randor hadn't witnessed all that Shadow Weaver was capable of with her dark sorcery, but he had seen enough to know that she was right. "I understand. What do you want?"

"I only wish to speak with you," she paused, deliberately letting the silence hang a moment before she spoke her next words, "about your daughter."

Randor flinched. He hoped the woman had not seen it, but knew she probably had. She had a gift for seeing in the darkness, as she had said. "My daughter is dead."

"Ahh, but you know that's not true," she replied, sounding amused.

"It is true," he said, a touch of defiance to his tone.

"But it's not. You said it yourself, as I heard it. 'You have your mother's eyes,' was it?" she hissed. "She told me. They spared your life, those words, if only due to Despara's confusion."

Randor winced at the name. "That foul creature you speak of is not my daughter."

"She doesn't think so. She thinks you're an insane old man. But you and I know better, don't we?" He heard the rustle of cloth once more as the eyes lowered. She was kneeling in front of him now. He felt her cold hand rest on his knee in a familiar fashion and he shuddered. "I raised her, you know. I took her from the Whelping Chambers and reared her as my own, helped her become the powerful warrior she is."

Randor grimaced in the dark. "You've made her a cold, uncaring monster, just like you."

That familiar hiss of laughter erupted once more as Shadow Weaver removed her hand. "Well, yes. I'm very proud of her, of what she has become. She's Force Captain now, the leader of Hordak's armies. She helps him take new worlds, aids him in breaking entire civilizations. She carries much influence within The Horde. You should be proud."

"I am merely sickened," he retorted.

She scoffed lightly at his response. "Such weak stock, you Eternians are. You should be thankful that Adora was raised here, to be a warrior and a leader."

He knocked her hand away with a sneer. "Don't you dare speak that name, Witch," Randor fumed. "You took that name away from her when you brought her here. It means 'love' in ancient Eternian, and I know you've no concept of the word. Hearing it uttered from your lips is an insult."

"I know," she laughed. "Why do you think I said it?" Her red eyes seemed to float upward as she stood and hovered slightly above the ground, as she always did. "The truth, Randor, is that I am your daughter's true mother, and Hordak is her true father. Despite your blood in her veins, nothing will ever change that. We raised her. She is ours."

Randor couldn't help but think that it was unusual for her to come here and see him. There had to be more to this visit than he was aware of. There had to be a reason. He gave the floating red eyes a curious look. "You sound unsure."

The hiss of laughter again filled the dark room. "Don't be foolish. Nothing can sway her. Despara likes what she is. She feels no eagerness to change."

He sighed. "On that, I'm sure you are right."

A smile crept up Shadow Weaver's face, hidden in the darkness of her hood as she opened his cell door. Without warning, she whipped her gaze to the open hallway. Something had obviously stolen away her attention, but Randor saw nothing. After a brief moment, she waved her hand through the air, as if she were casting something aside, and quickly left, sealing the door behind her. Randor wasn't sure what it was that she thought she'd seen and silently reminded himself that she was insane. He was sure that it was nothing at all.

■ ■ ■

Arriving at her quarters, Despara pressed a button on the wall next to the door and it slid open with a hiss of air. After looking briefly from her left to her right, she stepped inside. "Lights." As she spoke the word into the dark room, the voice-activated fixtures lit up and illuminated the stark quarters she called home. With little-to-no furniture, and no decoration to speak of, the quarters were very plain. Despara did not spend much time here. Other than its being a place to bathe, shower and sleep, she had little attachment to it.

She walked into her bathing room and carefully removed her mask and garments, laying them gently across a cold metal chair. Eyeing her nude form in the mirror, she gazed deep into her reflection. Her real eyes were a vivid blue, much different from the solid red of her mask's, but she saw no life or happiness behind their cold stare. What was happiness if not a sense of comfort in one's own skin? A feeling of pride in one's own appearance? It had been some time since she'd felt such things. Not for the first time, she wished her mask was her true face, that this pale human flesh she kept hidden away was nothing but a disguise. But the gods were cruel. As she stared into the mirror, she thought about her dreams, what Skeletor had said about her life itself being a dream, and even the words of the Eternian. Wary and confused, Despara looked at the girl in the mirror and asked her the same question she had been every day as of late. "Who are you?"

2.

LOST, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

“Just who do you think you are, mister?” Queen Teela said as she playfully jabbed her husband in the ribs.

“Why, I’m the king, of course,” Adam protested. “And that means that you have to do as I say!”

“My love, since when have I ever done as you say?” she asked mockingly.

He smiled at the retort, all too familiar with Teela’s defiant streak. Ever since they were children, she had always gone her own way. “Well you’ve got me there.” King Adam of the House of Randor was in the process of trying to get his wife onto her side of the bed. It was very late and she’d spread out, taking a large portion of his half. The bed in the royal bedchambers was large enough that it didn’t really even matter, but it was the principal of the thing.

“You know, if you came to bed at a decent time, you wouldn’t have to fight for territory.” Teela grinned as she sat up and pulled her reddish-blond hair back and away from her face, where it had settled during her sleep. After she had done so, she scooted over to her usual side. “Why have you been staying up so late, anyway?”

Adam lifted the covers and climbed in next to her. “Just official business,” he said casually. “Things have been hectic ever since the creation of the New Hemisphere. The people have begun calling the healed half of the planet ‘Newland’ and it seems every one of them feels it’s their gods-given right to settle there. Despite the obvious problem that alone causes, we need farmers and the like here, to help sustain Eternia, and there is also the issue of the various beasts that have been displaced with the sudden change in their environment. There have been more and more reports of Shadow Beasts and other creatures on our side of the former division line and—”

Teela shot him a look that brought his rather canned answer to a halt. “I know all of that, of course,” she said, “but don’t lie to me. That’s not what’s been keeping you up. We’ve both known each other as long as we can remember. You can’t give me the same answers you’d give one of your other friends. I know something has been bothering you, so why don’t you just tell me what it is?”

Adam sighed in defeat. She always had been able to read him more easily than he’d liked. It’s a wonder that he had been able to keep his former identity as He-Man a secret from her at all before they were wed. “You’re right.”

She smiled wryly. “Of course I’m right, so just spit it out.”

He felt himself fidget slightly. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to tell her, she had a right to know, but he had to admit some embarrassment, as the truth sounded silly, at least on the surface. “The truth isn’t that I can’t sleep, it’s that I don’t want to.”

Teela eyed him curiously and Adam knew that his queen was concerned. He could hear it in her voice as she spoke. “What do you mean?”

Adam shrugged. “I’ve been having the strangest dreams,” he paused, wondering how she would react to his next words, “about my father.”

Teela nodded knowingly, which shouldn’t have surprised him in the least. He wasn’t sure why he’d held off on telling her. It had been nearly a year since Adam’s father Randor had sacrificed himself in order to rid Eternia and all of Tellus of their mortal enemy Skeletor. Randor had learned through peculiar means that Skeletor was in fact his missing older brother Keldor, whom he’d long searched for, and had then engaged him in battle at Snake Mountain. Whether Randor had intended to save Skeletor’s soul or merely avenge the man he’d once been, Adam didn’t know. What he did know was how it had ended, with both Randor and Skeletor being swept into a portal that led to Despondos, a nearly empty void-like realm. Randor’s sacrifice had led not only to the end of

Skeletor, but to a new beginning for Tellus. After the battle, Adam had fulfilled the Sorceress of Grayskull's final wish by taking Skeletor's Sword of Darkness and merging it with his own Sword of Light. The reunion of the two Power Sword halves was the catalyst for healing the Dark Hemisphere, making it lush and green for the first time in an eon.

Despite this wonderful change, Adam had been having a difficult time as of late. He was sure she'd noticed that he struggled with self-doubt due to his no longer being able to transform into He-Man. Without Randor or the Sorceress for guidance, nor Castle Grayskull to call upon for answers, he felt lost. More than all of this however, he was simply a man who missed his father. In the end, maybe that was enough. Teela caressed her husband's face and brought it toward hers for a gentle kiss. Now sporting a beard of his own, Adam resembled Randor more than ever. The king pondered to himself whether or not that was the point. Perhaps it was a means of seeing his father in the mirror each day, despite his absence.

"Tell me about these dreams," Teela said.

He looked down toward the covers as he spoke. "They're different each time. It's not a recurring dream," he explained. "Sometimes they are just memories, simple things my father and I would do together when I was a child. Other times I dream about him being sucked into that cold void, but most of the time the dreams are pleasant; consisting of just my being in his presence. It's as if I can still feel him nearby."

"That sounds nice," she said.

He nodded. "It can be, but the fact of the matter is that whenever I wake up, I remember that he's gone and my heart breaks all over again. I just feel like with each day that passes..." he trailed off.

A worried expression crossed his face only briefly, but Teela caught it, nonetheless. "What is it, Adam?"

He looked away. "It's ridiculous. You'll think I've gone mad."

"Tell me."

He turned his gaze back toward her before he spoke again, a feeling of earnestness in his voice that surprised her. It was one of the only times in months that he'd seemed genuinely invested in something. Eternians believed dreams to be very powerful, a link to both the subconscious mind and even beyond. They believed that the eternal soul went to a place called the

Everdream after death, and that the souls of their ancestors could communicate with them during their nightly sleep. Adam felt that his dreams could be just that; his father's soul communicating with him beyond death. If that were so, then he was glad for it, as it meant that Randor was at peace. More than that, though, Eternians knew dreams to be a form of communication. Sometimes a link between two souls could be so powerful that they would see each other in a dream. Certainly the link between a father and his son would be that strong. Perhaps Randor's perpetual appearances within Adam's dreams were an indication that he still survived. "With each day that passes, I feel that I'm one day closer to losing him. That he's not truly lost yet. That he's still out there somewhere, waiting for me to find him."

She smiled and took his hand into her own, squeezing it reassuringly. "You're not mad, Adam. You just hold on to your hope longer than most."

He looked deeply into her eyes, searching. The same day he'd lost his father, she'd lost her mother, but they were different situations. They'd been with the Sorceress of Grayskull when she passed into the Everdream. They had witnessed her death and her body was buried nearby. Teela visited it often. There was a sense of peace to the Sorceress's death that Adam had not been afforded with the loss of his father. Randor had been swept into Despondos with Skeletor, but there was no telling what had happened to him afterward. There was the possibility, no matter how slight, that Randor was alive, but everyone seemed to have given him up for dead, due to Skeletor being with him. Everyone but Adam. "What about you? Have you given up hope? Do you feel he's truly dead?"

She shrugged. "I'll admit that I don't know what to think. I've felt my mother's presence from time to time as well. There is no way to know if what we feel is real or not. Belief in the Everdream is based on faith, rather than fact. We will probably never know whether or not it's real until we are there ourselves. I just know that if you are having this feeling, that your father is alive, you should act upon it."

"How so?" he asked.

She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Learn for yourself if it's true. Perhaps a magic-user could use a seeking spell to find him?"

Adam shook his head. "You know that I've already tried that. They can't seem to sense anything from within Despondos."

Teela paused, thinking. "If you're sensing your father in your dreams, and

he is alive, isn't it possible that he's not in Despondos anymore?"

A puzzled look crossed Adam's face. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I just mean that if you are having these dreams, they could mean something. Our lives have been touched by magic more than most. Perhaps there is more to these dreams than just images and feelings. Perhaps they're trying to tell you something. Maybe they're a sign that things have changed, that he is now free of that void and is somewhere else instead. I think you should seek out a more powerful mage or sorceress and find out. And if you're right," she paused, "save him."

"Are you suggesting that I go on a quest?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes. You've been brooding here in the palace for too long. I've seen it. You can't hide how you feel from me. I know you too well. My father and I can handle business here for a while. I saw my mother die, Adam. I can't imagine what it's like to not know what happened to your father. That sense of unknowing itself must be weighing on you greatly. Honestly, I feel that if you don't act on this, if you don't at least try, you'll regret it for the rest of your days. I don't want that for you. Even if the answer isn't what you hope, and your father truly is gone, at least you'll know. You'll know that his fate was out of your hands. But if he is alive, then it's your opportunity to bring him back to us."

"Have I told you lately how much I adore you?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes, but you can say it again."

"I absolutely adore you."

"When will you be leaving then?"

He thought a moment before responding. It didn't take long to come up with an answer. "Every time I dream of him, that feeling of losing him grows ever more urgent. I'll leave as soon as I'm ready. Perhaps even in the morning."

"Just promise me one thing, Adam."

"Anything," he answered.

"Promise me that you'll be gone no longer than two months." Teela grinned as she gently rubbed her enlarged stomach. "Promise me you'll be home for the birth of our son."

The king smiled joyously as he placed his hand upon her own, and upon

the future prince of Eternia. “I promise. I wouldn’t miss it for anything in all of the realms.”



Adam awoke the next morning with a renewed sense of purpose. He knew that this journey could quite possibly be for nothing, but he also knew that Teela was right. If he didn’t at least try, he’d regret it. The likelihood that his father was alive was slim. Even if he’d somehow survived Despondos and gotten out of that void, he was with Skeletor and there was a very good chance that he’d been killed immediately upon their possible escape. It was the dreams that caused Adam to move forward, that made him believe that his father still lived. Teela knew that Adam was a believer and it was the main reason she had encouraged him to undertake this mission, to discover the truth and there was only one way to find out the answer. Adam needed to seek out a powerful mage or sorceress, more powerful than what he could find within Eternia. With Teela’s mother, the Sorceress of Grayskull, gone, he had no one else to turn to. His father’s ban on magic had not lasted forever, but long enough that few magic-wielders resided within his kingdom. He would have to seek out someone else. He had an idea who, but no one was going to like it.

“Do you have everything you need?”

The sound of his father-in-law Duncan’s voice startled him and he turned quickly to see the Eternian Man-At-Arms within the doorway of his quarters. “Yes, Duncan, I won’t be bringing much.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Duncan had seemingly aged more than normal this past year after losing both his best friend Randor, and Teela’s mother, Teela ‘Na. His once-brown hair had grayed years ago, but was now whitish-silver along with his ever-present mustache. Casually attired, without his armor, he appeared older than he actually was. There was a light in his eyes that had not faded however, and in fact had only grown more prominent since the news of Teela’s pregnancy. Duncan was eager to become a grandfather.

“It’s alright,” Adam replied. “My nerves are a little shot, I’ll admit. Even when I was He-Man, I’d get nervous and this will be the first quest I’ve

undertaken since reuniting the swords.”

“Since you stopped being He-Man,” Duncan said.

He nodded. “Yes.”

Duncan stroked his mustache, an old habit that dated back to before Adam had even been born. “You have nothing to worry about. With Teela and me behind, the kingdom will be in good hands. As far as yourself, you are more than capable of handling this. It’s just a simple quest to find a magic-user. You’ll most likely be back within days.”

Adam glanced away momentarily before returning his eyes to his old friend. “I take it you don’t feel it will be more than that either, that this is just my way of getting closure. That my father is gone forever.”

Duncan sighed. “Now, I didn’t say that, Adam. Believe me, other than you, no one wants your father to be alive more than I do, but—”

“But you don’t think he is,” Adam interjected.

The older man shrugged. It was an unusual response from the normally stoic man. “I don’t honestly know what to think,” he said. “I hope so. Either way, I wish you luck.”

Adam smiled weakly. “Thank you.”

Duncan leaned against the doorframe. “So where will you go?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Adam lied.

“Hmmm,” Duncan said. He thought for a moment before continuing. “Might I suggest Stone Mountain? Our old ally Malik still calls it home. He may be able to help you.”

Adam nodded in acknowledgement. The Wizard of Stone Mountain had helped him before while Adam was still He-Man, although that was long ago. “Thank you. I’ll consider it as an option.”

“Will you be seeing Teela before you leave?” Duncan asked.

“Yes. She’s waiting for me downstairs.” Adam walked to the right wall of his and Teela’s bedroom and removed the reunited Sword of Power from its display, placing it into the familiar sheath upon his back. He removed his crown and placed it gently upon a nearby table. He wouldn’t need it where he was going.



Adam and Duncan found Teela waiting for them at the bottom of the stone staircase. Their baby was nearly due, and her normally flat stomach was showing prominently. Adam knew that his queen felt unattractive, her trim and athletic body changed drastically by her pregnancy, but he often reminded her of how beautiful he felt she was. In many ways, the glow that she had taken on since learning of their coming child had made her more beautiful than ever in Adam's eyes. He sat his bags down and approached her, bringing her into his arms with a smile. "I'll try not to be gone long," he said reassuringly. "I promise I'll be back in time."

"I know you will," she replied, "because you know you'll be living in the stables if you don't." He laughed as she said it, but stopped when he saw her serious expression. After a moment, she cracked a smile as well.

"Make sure you don't lose this," Duncan said as he handed Adam a holographic communicator. "It will allow you two to remain in contact with each other while you are away. I recently upgraded it. It has remarkable range now."

"Thank you, Duncan. It will be a great gift to see Teela's face, even while I am away." He turned it on, testing it for power, before shutting it off once more.

"Don't worry, Adam," Duncan said, "it should have more than enough power for your journey."

"Thank you, Father," Teela said with a smile. "This way, I can still boss him around even while he's gone."

Adam laughed. "You're sure the battery won't run out, Duncan?" he asked before feeling Teela's elbow digging into his side. He hooked the device to the rear of his belt and smiled devilishly.

His wife reached up and pulled him in for a kiss. "Be safe, my love."

"Always," he answered.

■ ■ ■

After saying his goodbyes to Teela and her father, Adam made his way out of Eternos Palace. He wore a hood to conceal himself as he walked through the capital city on his way to its gate. This mission was to be carried out in secret. As far as the people of Eternia would know, their king was safely within the palace. He approached the gate and walked through it, taking a brief moment to look back to see the palace shining brightly in the light of the sun. As he gazed upon his home, Adam thought that Eternia felt calm and at peace. It was a welcome feeling and one that had been all too rare during his war with Skeletor. Making his way out of the capital city, Adam mounted his Sky Sled, a single-operator vehicle of Duncan's creation. It had been hidden outside the wall by Duncan earlier in preparation for Adam's journey. Upon settling himself on the vehicle, Adam looked to the east, toward the ruins of Zalesia. There he would seek out his sorceress. He just had to figure out a way to get Evil-Lyn to help him.

3.

THE DRAGON MERELY SLEEPS

Despara stood in front of the punching bag and panted, straining to get her breath back. She stole a quick glance at her chrono and saw that she'd been exercising with the bag for nearly three hours. It felt like minutes. Sweat poured off of her as she walked over to a nearby bench where she'd left a dry towel. Picking it up, she brought it to her face and swept it up and over her forehead, drying her face first, followed by her short blonde hair. She was clad in black shorts and a matching shirt that normally hung loose, but was sticking to her after her workout.

Without her mask or armor, she felt naked and exposed, looking nothing like the fearsome image that she had fought so hard to achieve and maintain as The Horde's Force Captain. Her lean frame, while covered with the muscles of an athlete, was nonetheless not as intimidating as those of many of the other Horde members. With her body, however, it wasn't intimidation she strove for; it was perfection. Massive muscles could be intimidating, yes, but they also restricted your movement and slowed you down. Despara knew that if one was even a moment too slow on the field of battle, it could mean death. She did not fear death, for many reasons, but she believed in being efficient. Over her years of training, she had found what she considered to be a fine balance between

strength and agility and she spent hours each day working to maintain that balance.

The gym's lights were bright, making her flesh seem even paler than usual. She did not enjoy being exposed like this, but rather than hide in the darkness, she forced herself to train within the light. Self-acceptance was something she struggled with, more lately than ever before. The arrival of the sorcerer Skeletor and the Eternian human that had accompanied him had changed things. She was beginning to doubt herself and she did not understand why. She knew who she was. She was Force Captain of The Horde and the daughter of Lord Hordak. She possessed power unlike any other member of the Horde legions, save for Shadow Weaver. What more could she possibly ask for? How could Skeletor cause her to doubt her origins with only a few simple words?

She removed her clothes and stepped into the shower area. Turning on the water, she made it as cold as possible. It was a shock to her system but the chill helped soothe her aching muscles. When she had finished showering and drying herself, she stepped back into the gym and slipped on her gray and black bodysuit, along with her boots. Before she could continue, the whooshing sound of the gym door sliding open gave her pause and she turned to see a Horde trooper step through it. Taking off his helmet, he revealed a rather ugly human face, his right eye scarred and white. The trooper smiled at her, showing stained teeth. Few had seen Despara without her mask and this trooper had no idea who she was. She was not used to being disturbed. The gym was supposed to be hers for three hours with no interruptions, save for her father or Shadow Weaver's summons. No one else was allowed to disturb her. It was then that she remembered how she had lost track of time. Clearly, she should have thought of that before. Her mind had been wandering lately.

"Well, what have we here?" the trooper said with a grin as he looked her over. "I didn't know we had women like you in The Horde. They must be keeping you a secret."

She shot him a cold stare. "Something like that."

Not affected in the slightest by her expression, he walked toward her with a hungry look in his one good eye. "And a fine secret at that, you are. Such a pretty girl. Much better than the beasts and ugly alien women I usually have to keep me company."

She scoffed. "You're no great catch yourself. You should be able to see that, even with just one eye."

He shook his head. “Very funny, girly, but not a very nice thing to say to a big guy like myself.” He continued walking toward her.

“I wouldn’t come any closer if I were you,” she warned him, calmly clenching her fists.

He laughed. “Well, then I guess it’s a good thing you’re not me, because I’m coming closer.” He grinned wickedly as he stepped forward. When he got within reach of her, he stopped cold, the color draining from his face. Despara followed his eyes to a nearby bench where she had laid her cape, shoulder armor and, most importantly, her mask. The man stepped back suddenly. “I’m sorry, Force Captain Despara, I... I didn’t know it was you,” he stammered. “I had no idea you were huma—”

With a sudden movement, her fist became a blur as it struck the man in the throat. He collapsed to the ground with a gasp. When he struggled to achieve a kneeling position, she brought her right knee up forcefully, striking him in the chin. The man’s jaw made a loud cracking sound as he fell back in a heap. Despara didn’t know what the trooper had intended, if anything. He may have simply wanted to scare her. Either way, she didn’t care. He had recognized her when he’d caught sight of her mask. It was a simple case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She walked behind the man, lifting his unconscious body up into a sitting position. As she snapped his neck, she knew that her secret was still safe.



Cloaked within her disguise once more, Despara walked out of the gym in a hurry, her cape flowing behind her. She wouldn’t have had to kill the trooper if she had paid more attention and left at the usual time. It had been stupid of her to remain in the gym for so long and she cursed herself for it. She knew better, but something was wrong. She was becoming distracted as of late. When it came to the deed itself, it was no matter. There were plenty more troopers where that one came from and murder was not uncommon within The Horde. No one worked their way through the ranks without getting blood on their hands. The gym’s next occupant wouldn’t be surprised to find the man’s body. It would be incinerated and not given a second thought. What bothered her was the fact that she had allowed herself to be exposed in such a manner. It was not like her

to be so distracted.

Striding briskly through the stark metallic gray hallway, her face was again covered, hidden behind her mask's grotesque visage. The mask was a wonder of technology, designed by Hordak himself. The purpose it served was more than just intimidation and instilling fear. It truly was a disguise of the highest order. Created using technology as yet undiscovered by mere mortals, it acted as a second skin for her. Made in her father's image, it reacted to the most subtle of her facial movements, mimicking them for the outside world with a thought. She had the ability to control this and remain seemingly passive if she so chose. Most of the time however, it mirrored her expressions and movements in an effort to convince those around her that she was of Hordak's race. She was his daughter, after all, and her being human would raise too many questions for Hordak's liking.

It also acted as an added layer of protection, shielding her from nearly any weapon known. Despara was Hordak's emissary and his foremost general. Her duties often brought her to the front line and he did not wish her to be injured. Her armor was unique in the universe, her father possessing the only other like it, other than a prototype he was rumored to have locked away. While many believed magic to consist of things forever unexplainable, Hordak understood that in reality, most magic was simply science that was not yet understood within its time. Having lived for more than a thousand years, her father understood more about both types than anyone alive.

What turned certain types of science to magic was misdirection, the bait-and-switch that hid how it worked from watching eyes. Hordak was labeled a sorcerer by most, but Despara knew that he considered himself a master of both forms of magic; "a scientist of the arcane," in his words. Her armor would seem to most to be magical in its properties, but it was in reality a wonder of science. Every piece of her uniform, even the seemingly unarmored bodysuit, was created from materials forged by Hordak, who used his great knowledge to infuse them with elements that shielded her from virtually any harm. She had little concern when it came to her enemies' weapons. Her training had made her a warrior, but her armor made her fearless.

So what was making her lose a step? She may be reckless at times in the heat of battle, but she had never been reckless during her daily activities before. Despara kept a strict regimen, her schedule seldom changing. For her to lose track of time was unprecedented. She knew it had to do with the new prisoners. Why did her father keep them here, within the very tower he called home? Why had they not been killed or sent to the prison on Beast Island? Usually, if Hordak

had cause to keep a prisoner alive, that is where they were sent. That he kept them here, within his very home, was more than just unusual. It meant something. These prisoners were important to him for some reason, and she intended to find out what that reason was.



The sun was bright. Billowy white clouds drifted by in the gentle breeze. Despara felt it on her face, blowing her hair about. It was longer than usual and she could feel it tickling her ears. A child's cry caused her to turn from the balcony on which she stood and she caught sight of a man with shoulder-length blonde hair and a matching beard. He was leaning against the doorframe and smiled at her when she saw him. She knew him, but no matter how hard she struggled, she could not remember his name. Upon his head was a golden crown. He was a king, or perhaps a prince. But where was she? The man stepped away from the door and removed a silver sword from a sheath on his back. She felt her body tense instinctively, anticipating his attack, but was surprised instead to see him hold it out in both hands, as if offering it to her.

Looking past the blond man, she saw others standing behind him. One of them was an older man with dark brown hair, lightly streaked with gray. He was also bearded and bore more than a passing resemblance to the man in the crown. The brown-haired man looked upon her with sadness, as if he knew that it would be the last time he would ever see her. Without removing her gaze from the man in the back, she took the sword that had been offered to her and thrust it violently into the blond man's chest in a single elegant movement.

Despara awoke with a gasp. Sweat had beaded on her forehead and she felt flushed and hot, as if the cooling unit in her quarters had stopped functioning. She lay in the darkness and tried to remember her dream. She felt ashamed at having had one at all. Dreams were forbidden within her father's capital city, blocked by the same spell that blocked the use of magic, and until recently she had never had one. At first she'd thought she was losing her mind. However, speaking with Skeletor had convinced her that they were in fact dreams; dreams somehow so powerful that they had pierced her father's spell.

Thinking back, the images from her dream began to return to her and she remembered. It was the same as usual. The blond man. The sword. But this

time, she had seen someone else as well: an older man who seemed strikingly familiar. *The Eternian prisoner!* she thought with alarm. In one sudden movement, she sat upright and bolted from her bed. It was about time she learned the truth.

She dressed quickly, the placement of her mask over her true face signaling the completion of her disguise. She strode out into the hallway and made her way to the cells, which were located on a lower level, at a brisk pace. When she arrived, she turned in the direction of the Eternian's cell before stopping and instead entering Skeletor's. *The devil you know*, she thought to herself. Upon the door's opening, she stepped into the brightly lit cell. Skeletor sat on the floor, leaning against the opposite wall. She stepped toward him, grabbing him by his leather armor and, aided by her suit's strength enhancers, hoisted him to his feet. He stood taller than she did, and much broader. His eerie yellow/green skull tilted down toward her, its eye sockets seeming to bore holes into her as he leveled his gaze upon her face.

Despite his height and size advantage, she did not fear him. He was weak. She reared her right hand back and struck him across his skull with all of the force she could manage. Her strike forced his head violently to his right. He slowly brought it back toward her and lowered his skeletal jaw in what she had come to know as a smile. "I tire of your games, Sorcerer," she said calmly, contrary to her previous action. "You claim you know that I dream. Fine. I admit it. So tell me," she looked deep into the empty spaces where his eyes should have been, "what do they mean?"

Skeletor chuckled. "I'm not a simple mage you pay to show you your future, girl. What I do, the spells I cast, they are no mere parlor tricks, nor are they feats of science idiots don't understand. They are the old ways of darkness and one such as you will never understand their power. Why don't you ask one of the fools from the Whispering Woods? I have better things to do than tell you your fortune."

"Better things to do? Like what? Rot in this cell?" she charged.

He laughed grimly. "There will come a day when this cell will no longer hold me. You know that."

"I know you like to believe it." She let him go and took a slight step back. "Then tell me this: why does my father keep you and the Eternian alive?"

Skeletor cocked his head slightly. "Randor is alive? That's a surprise to me, as well."

She perked as she heard the man's name for the first time. "Randor"? That is the Eternian's name?"

Skeletor again gave her his version of a smile. "Perhaps."

She regarded him with a puzzled expression, her mask emulating it perfectly. "You don't do anything by accident, do you? You didn't simply let his name slip. You're too intelligent for that. You wanted me to know."

Skeletor folded his arms nonchalantly. "Everything I do serves a purpose," he said coolly.

"What purpose?" she asked.

He leaned close to her, his voice coming as a whisper. "My purpose." She took another step back and he pursued her. "You can think of me as your toy, if you wish, your dog to be trained, but know, young one, that I am every bit as fearsome as your master Hordak. I commanded the entire Horde, directly beneath him, for far more years than you think. I was known as the 'Lord of Destruction' and entire planets fell to their knees before me. If you think that you can intimidate me with a mask full of circuitry to hide your pretty face and a few minor beatings, then you are mistaken. Someday I will break free of this cursed cell and when I do, rest assured that if you oppose me I will rip the very life-force from your body, adding it to my own. I will drain your blood and let it run through the halls as a signal that I, Skeletor, have returned."

He grabbed her throat in his left hand and squeezed. Her armor protected her, allowing her to breathe despite his firm grip. She shot a fist toward him in a blur of speed, but he caught it in his other hand and twisted it behind her back. "I've played the role I've wished to play up until this point, but no longer," he continued. "Do not fool yourself into thinking that my magic is what gives me my power, that with it gone, I am weak. Magic does not fuel me. Magic is not the key to my strength. It is my will! And if I willed it, I could crush you like an insect." He pushed her back, releasing his hold on her. "You're lucky that that's not what I want, at least not yet. We'll see if my mind changes." He paused before adding, "This little game of ours is over."

She immediately dropped into a defensive stance, but he simply sat back down on the floor of his cell with a soft chuckle. "I know more about you than you can possibly imagine, Despara, but I won't be answering any of your questions tonight, save for one. You want to know why Hordak hasn't killed Randor and me?" he asked. "He hasn't killed us because it pleases him to keep us alive, simple as that. And that hubris will be his undoing. I will have my vengeance

and when I do, you can rest assured that it will be swift.”

She should have killed him for threatening her father, for even having the gall to lay his hands upon her. She should have unsheathed her sword and decapitated him then and there, but instead she hurriedly opened the door to his cell and left, shaken.

4.

ZALESIA

Making his way out of Eternia, Adam pulled his goggles tighter to his face. Twisting the handle he held tight in his left hand, he pushed the Sky Sled to its top speed, the wind blowing his clothing about violently. Hovering several feet above the surface, he sped along at a fast pace on the small personal vehicle, but still sluggishly slow compared to the speeds he'd once approached riding atop Battle Cat. These days Battle Cat, much like He-Man, no longer existed. Adam's pet tiger Cringer, however, had adjusted to his alter-ego's retirement with far less difficulty than his master. Having reached an age where he was pleased to be left at home, Cringer was surely spread out somewhere in the palace at this very moment, most likely on a plush rug and no doubt in a patch of sun. Adam smiled at the thought.

Unlike Cringer, Adam had not been so ready to retire his alternate identity. He-Man had been a huge part of Adam's life for the past decade. From the age of seventeen and on into adulthood, being the defender of Grayskull had been his life's purpose. Of course, the last year of his time as He-Man had been difficult. The task of trying to balance that responsibility with the added responsibility of being king of Eternia after his father had abdicated the throne was not one that Adam would wish on anyone, and had been very taxing.

Regardless of that fact and of the dangers that He-Man was created to oppose, it had been the most fun of Adam's life. With that outlet now gone, he felt empty, as if half of him had been torn away.

Adam had no regrets over reuniting the Power Sword halves as it had been a boon to Tellus and the now healed half of the planet once known as the Dark Hemisphere was a beauty to behold, or so he had heard. Other than a few early scouting missions that he'd participated in, Adam had not revisited the place the people had named "Newland." The duties of the kingdom had kept him busy. This mission was a reprieve given to him by his wife Teela, and Adam knew it. He knew that she could sense the restlessness within him as of late. That he had not already travelled throughout Newland was due purely to his duties as king and he was thankful to now have the opportunity.

If he really thought about it and admitted it, it was also possible that fear had been keeping him away. His wife had probably seen that, too. Not a fear of the land itself or its changes, but a fear of embarking on such a mission without the safety net of becoming the most powerful man in the universe. As much as he had enjoyed his time as He-Man, Adam had to admit that the power of Grayskull had become a crutch to him. It was time to realize his potential post He-Man. Teela and Duncan may have thought that this was a simple mission with little risk, and had even told him as much, but Adam felt that they were wrong. Something real was happening here. This was not a lark due to the simple dreams of a man who missed his father. Adam knew that it was more than that. It had to be. A visit to Stone Mountain would be simpler, but this would be a true test. He didn't know if Evil-Lyn could be trusted to help him, but he didn't feel that he had a choice.



Adam was surprised to find that the division line between the two hemispheres, once so clearly visible and defined, was now only noticeable due to the rubble that remained behind from the toppling of the Mystic Wall. He eased up slightly on the throttle of his Sky Sled as he swept over the rocks and debris of the wall that had once kept the light half of the planet safe from Skeletor and the multitude of other evils that dwelled on this half of the planet. Now covered in lush greenery and young trees, the former Dark Hemisphere was alive for the

first time in an eon and Adam had to admit that it was indeed as beautiful as he'd heard, an area of Tellus that seemed to have been birthed anew. He knew that there were villages and cities aplenty on this half of Tellus, but the area he travelled in was raw and unchanged by its inhabitants. He wondered if it looked similar to how Eternia had, before it had been built up by numerous villages, and of course the capital city itself.

Adam was heading in the direction of Snake Mountain, although slightly more south. It was a journey he'd made numerous times as He-Man, during his decade-long series of battles with Skeletor, who along with his minions had long called Snake Mountain home. Despite the familiar nature of his current travels, the land itself was nearly unrecognizable in its new state. Where there had once been streams of lava and molten rock, there were now rivers of crystal clear water and lush, rolling hills, as green and flowered as the images found in a child's storybook. It was no wonder, he thought, that so many wished to move their families here. It was a stunning environment, to be sure. What made Adam weary of people settling here was the simple fact that it was not as pure as it seemed. Dark forces still lived here and the native beasts were likely to be even more aggressive than normal, due to the rapid changes in their environment. No, it was not safe to live here, at least not yet. Perhaps in time, when things had calmed into a more stable ecosystem, it would be an option. In the meantime, it was his duty as king to protect his people, and he did not feel it was the right time. Not yet. That being said, the Eternian people were not slaves and, although he disagreed, many had already left for these seemingly greener pastures.

The beautiful plains Adam had been flying over slowly transitioned into a vast desert once ominously named the Dunes of Doom. He didn't know whether or not they had been renamed since the climate change. The dunes slowed his rate of travel considerably, but after another hour, he finally came upon Death Channel and crossed its waters safely, despite the legends of monsters that lived within it. Much had changed on this side of Tellus and the channel now appeared to be the same as any found on the hemisphere Adam called home; peaceful and quiet. After crossing the channel, the landscape once again shifted to desert and the ruins of the city of Zalesia, long abandoned, slowly rose into sight on the horizon. Resembling a war zone, Zalesia had been destroyed by the snake god Serpos during the First Age at the behest of King Hsss and his snake men. Eons later, little remained of the once-great city and it had largely been retaken by the desert sands, sections of its towers and buildings emerging from the sand in broken fragments.

Adam felt a chill creep up his spine as he entered the dead city and

neared the end of his journey. He had no idea if Evil-Lyn would be here, but if she had been truthful to his father in her letter, then this was the place to start looking. When the seemingly untouched temple that sat at the center of the ruins came into view, Adam slowed his Sky Sled and came to a stop near the entrance, climbing down off of the vehicle. Even here, plant life seemed to have found a way to grow, beautiful desert flowers spreading around the base of the temple. He craned his neck up and took in the sight of the place. The structure's primary feature was a large ram-headed sculpture, similar in a way to the skull that had graced the front of Castle Grayskull when it still stood watch over the barrier between hemispheres. The sculpture was a representation of Havok, the human/animal hybrid-like god once worshiped by the long-gone Zalesian people. The ram skull with its twisted horns was the inspiration for a number of Zalesian artifacts including the Ram Stone and Skeletor's Havok Staff. Despite the Zalesian's faith in Havok, it hadn't been enough to save them from Serpos's wrath. As the Eternian king gazed upon the temple, he felt a strong sensation within him that it was empty. Carefully ascending the temple's sand-dusted marble steps, he entered anyway.



Hours later, Adam sat on the steps that lead to the entrance of the temple and sighed. There had been nothing inside of any use to him. While the temple looked to be in pristine shape from the outside, the interior told a different story. The once gleaming marble floor was now dull and cracked. The columns that he imagined had once been so striking were now connected with cobwebs, the intricate details sculpted into them long ago filled with dust and sand. There had been no signs of life inside. He had not seen anything that would indicate that someone, or even something, had been dwelling within the temple. He had hoped to at least have found some bedding, or the remnants of a fire; something, anything, which would have indicated that Evil-Lyn had been there. Instead he had found nothing but empty rooms and it seemed that his journey was over almost before it had begun.

Adam reached to the back of his belt and pulled out the holocommunicator Duncan had given him that morning. Flicking it on, he waited patiently for a response. After a long moment, the communicator lit up and a holographic image of his wife appeared, projected from the communicator's small lens.

“Adam!” she greeted him warmly. “I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“I wanted to tell you goodnight,” he responded.

“Where are you?”

“Outside of an old temple. I’d rather not say, exactly. It’s far from home, though.”

“Any luck?” Teela asked.

“Not yet, unfortunately.” He fidgeted on the hard step. It was far from comfortable. “I’m beginning to think that this was a mistake. Maybe you and Duncan were right.”

“Adam, neither I nor my father said you were wrong. In fact, I truly hope that you are right. I…” she paused, momentarily silent. “I didn’t know how to say it last night, but do you remember when I told you that I could still feel my mother’s presence sometimes?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“Well, there has to be something to that, right? It can’t just be my nerves. Perhaps there really is an Everdream. It’s what we all want to believe, after all. And if there is, and your father is trying to reach out to you somehow, well then I think you shouldn’t give up so easily.”

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “This first visit may not have played out as I’d hoped, but I have other alternatives. I’ll be staying here tonight, it’s too late to move on now, but in the morning, I’ll make my way to Stone Mountain.”

“Good luck, Adam. You know that I love you and I want nothing more than for you to be successful.”

“I know, Teela. I know. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my love. Don’t despair.”

“I’ll try my best,” he said with a small sigh before shutting the communicator off.

The brief holo-conversation with his wife had done little to improve Adam’s spirits and he was, in fact, beginning to despair. There may indeed be no real point to this mission. Perhaps his father truly was gone. Adam had resigned himself to the fact that Evil-Lyn had moved on, or simply did not want to be found. Due to this, he had made the decision to leave for Stone Mountain in the

morning, just as he'd told Teela, but already felt defeated in doing so. Malik would mean well, but Adam knew that without the help of Evil-Lyn, he didn't see much chance for success. There just wasn't anyone else out there powerful enough to help him, at least among those whom he felt could he could convince to do so.

Adam removed the Power Sword from its sheath on his back and peered deep into its spotless silver sheen. In it, he saw his reflection and recognized the familiar weariness in his eyes, for it was the same weariness they'd had since the night his father had been taken from him. He could feel the power of the Sorceress of Grayskull within the sword, but he could not tap into it. He felt, in the back of his mind, that it was not his to tap into. He was powerless. His reflection dimmed with shadows as the sun began to dip below the sand dunes, far to the West. It was getting dark and he'd have to make camp soon. Adam stood up and sheathed his weapon as he walked to where he'd parked his Sky Sled. He opened the large leather satchel that hung from the side of the vehicle and removed a round black disc, about the size of a dinner plate. Taking it with him, he climbed the temple's steps and entered it once more, stopping a few yards within the structure. Setting the disc down gently on the temple floor, which the wind-blown sand had nearly covered this close to the entrance, he pressed the large red button that protruded from it and stepped back.

An invention of his father-in-law Duncan, the disc began to separate into sections before quickly expanding with a muffled thump into a large tent. The wonder of Man-At-Arm's design was both windproof and waterproof, but rain was least of Adam's worries here in the desert. He returned to the Sky Sled for some supplies and once he'd returned, he ate a small dinner, the same type that his army would eat when away from home. Afterward, he went to sleep inside the tent, both disappointed that he'd not found anything and wondering yet again as to whether this trip had been a waste of time after all.

■ ■ ■

The night passed without incident. Adam awoke early when the morning light from outside the temple crept its way up the steps leading to the entrance and lit the inside of his tent with a warm glow. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and began to stretch. He stopped suddenly upon hearing the distinct crunching

sound of footsteps on the sand covered marble floor where he'd set his tent up the night before. Listening intently, he sensed that whoever it was was nearby. He felt the grogginess of sleep leave him quickly as a broad silhouette crept up the front of his tent. Someone was standing between the entrance of the temple and his suddenly all-too-small enclosure.

Adam reached for his sword before a woman's voice stopped him. "That won't be necessary."

"Who are you?" he asked.

The silhouette stepped back away from the entrance. "Come out of there and we'll introduce ourselves formally. Leave the weapon."

Wondering how the woman had known that he was armed, he did as she instructed. He left the sword behind and slowly unzipped the tent before stepping out into the bright morning light. He could not make out the woman's features, as she was backlit by the sun. Regardless of the light, he saw that it would have made little difference as she wore a long hooded cloak that concealed her face. "I'm looking for Evil-Lyn," he said matter-of-factly.

The woman stood motionless. "You won't find anyone by that name here."

"It was my understanding that she was in Zalesia," he said. "Do you know if she's passed through here?"

"There is no one here, save for me, King Adam of Eternia," she answered.

Hearing her speak his name startled him. "How did you—"

"Gods," she interrupted. "You always have been a bit of a half-wit. It's amazing you've survived this long." The woman reached up and removed her hood, revealing a very familiar face. Her white hair was cut short and slicked back. Adam couldn't help but notice her piercing green eyes boring into his. She seemed annoyed by his presence.

"Evil-Lyn," he said.

"I don't use that name any longer," she replied. "You can call me 'Evelyn.'"

"You've gone back to using your birth name?" he asked.

The older woman nodded. "I have no desire to continue using a name bestowed upon me by one of the most evil forces in all the realms."

“Skeletor?” he inquired.

She laughed grimly. “No, Adam. Not Skeletor.” She walked slowly to his right, and leaned against one of the large columns that held up the ceiling. No longer backlit, he got a better look at her and saw that the yellow color of her skin was gone, having returned to its original pale white state. She saw the unasked question written upon his face and answered it. “Yes, it’s gone. I take it you read my journal?”

“Yes, after my father disappeared,” he answered.

“Then you know that it was the price of an old spell. A price I no longer have to pay.”

“How?”

“I gave up that portion of my power, but I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” she replied shortly. “What are you doing in my home?”

A puzzled expression crossed his face. “Your home? I looked all through this temple last night. I saw nothing but cobwebs.”

“You saw what I wanted you to see. Now answer the question,” she said with a touch of impatience. “You said you were looking for me, but I don’t want to be found. I could have just waited for you to leave, but I have to admit that I’m puzzled as to your presence. You were quite possibly the last person I was expecting to seek me out. So again, Adam, why are you here?”

“I need your help,” he answered.

She erupted with a gale of laughter that echoed throughout the old ruins. “What in the worlds would give you the idea that I’d do such a thing?”

“I know you don’t have any reason to, but I gathered from the letter you gave my father that you’d changed. Maybe I was wrong,” he wagered.

She sighed slightly, her face taking on a more serious expression. “You said Randor disappeared?”

Adam nodded. “Yes. We had our final battle with Skeletor nearly a year ago after my father learned of Keldor’s fate through your journal. He was swept into the dimension of Despondos, but I can’t shake the feeling that he is still alive.”

She began to speak, but hesitated a moment before she managed to say,

very quietly, “and Skeletor?”

“The same,” he answered. “They were both lost in the vortex.”

She glanced away briefly, before returning her eyes to his. “I suppose I owe you then. I had expected to hear from my old master after delivering the journal. I can only imagine that Skeletor was intensely angry with me when he found out what I had done. Of course, now I know why I haven’t seen him. It had seemed a bit quiet lately in general, to be honest, but I swore to myself that I wouldn’t get involved.”

“But surely now, you must,” Adam argued. “In many ways, what happened to my father is your fault. If you hadn’t delivered that journal to him, none of this would have happened.”

She waited a long moment before speaking. “So what is it exactly that you want from me?”

He ran his fingers through his hair as he sought the proper way to approach the answer. “I just want to know if my father is alive. I’ve been having dreams, very vivid dreams, and you know how we Eternians feel about them.”

She nodded. “You think you’re actually seeing him; his soul.”

“Don’t you?” he asked.

“I’ve never shared those beliefs, though I will admit that dreams can be very powerful. One woman’s dream changed my entire life’s path, so I know what they can do, or at least what people who believe in them can do. The connection between you and your father was probably strong enough to make it possible, I suppose.”

“Then you will help me?” he asked.

“I don’t know what it is you expect me to do,” she responded. “I can’t just zap him here, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t have the tools for that sort of thing. I will say that if he is in Despondos, it’s unlikely that he’s still alive, especially if Skeletor is with him.”

He nodded desperately. “I know that, I do, but I think perhaps he’s not in Despondos any longer. That maybe he’s escaped. It’s possible isn’t it?”

She shook her head. “Not as such, no. Escape from Despondos is impossible. Even Hordak could not escape Despondos without my help, willing or not. What is possible is that he could have been drawn out by someone else.”

What she said of Hordak was true, Adam knew. And if a being as powerful as Hordak couldn't escape of his own accord, it was impossible for Randor to have escaped. Even if Randor and Skeletor had come to some kind of agreement, which was unlikely, it wouldn't have made any difference as Adam's old enemy was a prisoner of the void as well. But that just meant that his father hadn't escaped on his own. Someone would've had to have taken him, as she had said. "If he were no longer in Despondos, could you use magic to find his location somehow?"

"If," she emphasized the word, "he's no longer there, then yes, it is possible. But I fail to see why you need me to help you. Why don't you just become He-Man and do it yourself?" Upon seeing his shocked expression Evelyn continued. "Oh, yes, I know all about your secret, dear king. I'm not an idiot. I've kept it to myself for some time because, to be completely honest, I thought it was rather amusing: two bitter enemies being related, and neither of them knowing it? Tell me that isn't rich," she said with a smile. "Plus, it's always good to have an ace up your sleeve, especially when dealing with the likes of Skeletor. One never knew when a bargaining chip would be needed to convince him to spare your life." Her smile waned at the memory. "Luckily for you, I had plenty of other chips as well, so your identity remained a secret."

Adam knew that he shouldn't trust her, but it was only a matter of time before she found out the truth anyway. She was obviously far cleverer than he had given her credit for being. "The truth is that I can't," he answered. "After Skeletor and my father disappeared, the Sorceress of Grayskull told me to unite the two Power Sword halves and I did. It brought balance back to Tellus, but it also took away my access to the power of Grayskull."

"So you're the one responsible for that?" she asked, her eyebrows rising in surprise. "That explains my new garden," she quipped. "Speaking of the Sorceress, how is that insufferable woman?" she asked, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

Adam knew of Evelyn's jealousy towards Teela's mother, but told her the truth anyway. Perhaps she would get some satisfaction from it and help him. There was no use in keeping it a secret, after all. "She's dead, as is Grayskull itself, crumbled to pieces."

Evelyn's eyes widened. "That answers many questions I've had over this past year. I'd felt a change in the planet. I had thought it simply due to the change in the Dark Hemisphere, making it," she paused, indicating the changed area outside, "this. It only makes sense that it was more than that. In order for

the planet to have its balance restored, the power housed inside of Grayskull would have had to reenter it. Without the need to protect the power, the castle no longer served a purpose, nor did its Sorceress. Am I right?"

"Yes, more or less," he answered.

"And now," she continued, "without your precious Sorceress to turn to, you've sought me out instead."

"Yes."

"Why me, of all souls?" she asked.

"Because you are now the most powerful sorceress I know," he answered. "You could have been the Sorceress of Grayskull yourself if things had gone differently. And to tell the truth, I don't have anyone else to ask, at least no one that I trust to be powerful enough to help me."

She stood silently for a long moment. "For helping rid this world of Skeletor, I will help you. It was only a matter of time before he came to exact his revenge on me. More than that, you're right. It is my fault in a way. I never intended for anything to happen to your father. My quarrel has never been with him. If it will help atone for that in some small way, then I suppose that I can at least help you discover whether or not he is still alive."

He nodded in thanks. "That's all that I ask."

"Then follow me," she commanded.

5.

THE MISSION

The map laid out over the table in Hordak's private chambers was old and in poor shape, although it was obvious that numerous attempts had been made to restore it. Pieces of it that had once been missing were now reattached with great care and skill. Not a map of land, as were most of its kind, this was a map of stars. A thousand dots of light littered the ancient parchment, each one representing a galaxy of its own. Several specific galaxies were highlighted with glowing glyphs, marked by Hordak with spells rather than other, cruder forms of writing that would damage the artifact. Each one was a piece of a larger puzzle, one that Hordak had been piecing together for centuries. Hearing his door's buzzer, the Horde leader gently rolled the map up and placed it in a drawer amongst a dozen others like it. He waved his hand and the button on the wall that controlled his door depressed magically, causing it to slide open.

He sensed that it was his adopted daughter outside and his premonition was confirmed when he turned and saw Despara slowly enter, the door closing behind her. She seemed uneasy, as was Hordak's intent. Throughout the young woman's life she'd only been inside of his personal quarters a handful of times. He could sense that she was afraid. Good. He wanted her out of her element. Through his lessons over the years, she had grown to be a very cold individual

and taking her out of her comfort zone made it easier for Hordak to read her. “You called for me,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” he answered, glancing in her general direction but remaining generally aloof to her presence. “Shadow Weaver tells me that you’ve been acting strangely. Your schedule has become irregular. You rarely speak to her.”

She crossed her arms in what he took to be an effort to seem calm. Whether she was or not, he was still unsure. “To be fair, she’s never been one for conversation,” she said.

Hordak smiled faintly as he continued to peruse the different maps in his drawer, looking for a particular one. “Nevertheless, she’s becoming concerned.”

“She needn’t be,” Despara replied flatly.

“Very well.” He finally turned his gaze toward her, but with her mask on, there was no telling what the girl was thinking, despite the strange surroundings he had intended to unnerve her with. She was getting better at hiding her thoughts from him. He knew he could simply command her to remove her false face, but he didn’t buy into Shadow Weaver’s concerns any more than his daughter seemed to. He dismissed them silently before he spoke once more. “I have a mission for you.”

Despara smiled, the mask emulating the movement. “Am I to engage more rebels? I’ve been a bit cooped up.”

He turned and walked toward the wall of his chamber. “No. Nothing so trite.” He waved his hand once more, activating a switch that controlled a hidden panel in the wall. After it had opened, he reached in and pulled out a small electronic device, turning to face her once again. “This mission will not be carried out on Etheria. I would go myself but, as much as I hate to admit it, this rebellion demands my attention and I must remain here until it is crushed. And you’re right; it has been some time since you’ve ventured out. It will be good for you. Besides that fact, the mission cannot wait.”

“Where will I be going?” she asked.

“Elesian,” he answered.

She raised her eyebrows curiously. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to have,” he said. “It’s located roughly ninety galaxies from the one that this planet calls home. I need you to make your way there immediately.”

She cocked her head slightly to the side at his words. "I don't understand. No one can travel that far, not even The Horde, at least not very quickly."

Hordak shook his head lightly. "You are mistaken. Don't concern yourself with how you will get there, my daughter. Leave that up to me. The task itself is fairly simple. It is a retrieval mission."

"A retrieval mission?" she repeated.

"Yes," he answered. "You sound disappointed, but if it is adventure you crave, do not fear. The mission's timing is of utmost importance as Elesian's nearest star is about to go supernova."

"It's going to explode?" she asked, alarmed. "You call that simple?"

He nodded. "For you, yes. It will happen soon. My calculations show that it could occur within days. That is why you must leave immediately and bring the item back to me before it is lost forever." He paused, gazing deep into her mask's unreadable red eyes. "Unless you don't feel you can accomplish this task?"

"Of course I can," she retorted, "if you can get me there as fast as you say. How many troopers will you be assigning me and what is it that I will be bringing back?"

"You will be going alone. A small personal fighter is being prepped for you." He paused, noticing her expression. It had been expected. "A fighter cannot travel that distance on its own," he said, answering her unasked question, "but as I told you before, do not concern yourself with that aspect of your mission." He handed her the device he'd taken from the hidden panel. She took it in her gloved hands and studied it as he continued. "This will lead you to the item I seek."

Despara rested her hands at her sides and glanced back up at him. "You will tell me nothing more specific than that?" she asked, her tone revealing her frustration.

He shook his head. "The object you hold in your hands is all that you will need. Now, go, before it's too late. Shadow Weaver will meet you in my personal hangar bay."

"Yes, Father," she answered.

As she turned to walk out the door, he called after her. "And Despara?"

She turned back around to face him, thinking perhaps that he was going to wish her luck, as he did on occasion. “Yes, Father?”

“Do not fail me,” he said simply.

She nodded solemnly. “I won’t.”



The sleek black fighter gleamed under the bright lights, immediately catching Despara’s eye as she entered the massive hangar bay. Located near the top of Hordak’s tower, this hangar was reserved for Hordak’s personal vessels and assault ships. The ship waiting for her was rather small, dwarfed by the large vessels that littered the rest of the hangar with their clunky metallic bodies. Despara’s new fighter was of a different breed than the rest. It was rounded, with no visible edges, giving it an almost organic appearance. A stealth craft, it was unable to be picked up on opposing ships’ or planetary sensors.

Shadow Weaver was waiting for her near the small fighter. No one else was within the hangar bay, giving it an eerie stillness and silence. *This mission truly must be important*, Despara thought. The hanger, normally bustling with activity before a launch, was empty. Hordak had made sure that no one would be here to see her leave, other than her mother. Shadow Weaver greeted her with a nod, hovering a foot off of the ground, as she always did. Despara knew that her mother preferred to do this because it aided her fearsome appearance. Shadow Weaver had done it for so long that she now did it even when she was alone. Her red robe pooled in the air at her feet as if it were spread across the floor, although it touched nothing, and rippled and flowed like a liquid. Her billowy sleeves hid her arms, which rested at her sides. The only other adornment she wore was a belt shaped like the Horde’s bat crest and a red gem, which hung from a golden chain that wrapped around her neck. Her face, as always, was hidden in the darkness of her hood, save for her bright glowing eyes. The simple nod Despara received from her was not unexpected. Although Shadow Weaver was a watchful mother, she had never been an affectionate one.

“I don’t know how Lord Hordak expects this ship to take me as far as he says it will, but I guess I’ll have to take him at his word,” Despara said as she

approached the woman in red that awaited her, her voice sounding small in the large hangar.

“It will. Hordak modified the ship personally just this morning,” Shadow Weaver replied.

Despara was surprised at that particular revelation. Hordak didn’t usually do things that were so menial. Secrecy here was at a high level indeed, even more so than she had thought previously. “I don’t understand why he doesn’t just put this technology, whatever it is, into all of our ships.”

“Such a thing is not necessary,” her mother answered. “One such device could take an entire fleet, if need be. You will see soon enough.”

“Why have I not used it before, then?” Despara asked. “Why are our forces limited to our hyperlight drives?”

Shadow Weaver’s face was unreadable, hidden within her dark hood as she spoke. “The item being used is most secret. Only your father and I know of its existence, and so it will stay. You don’t require any knowledge of how it works.” There was an air of command in her words. “Lord Hordak has hardwired it into the ship. Your destinations have been predetermined. You will go to this planet, wherever it is he is sending you. Once you have completed your mission, you will return. You will not deviate from your flight plan. Is this understood?”

“Yes,” the Force Captain answered. “I will do exactly as I was instructed.”

Shadow Weaver nodded once more. “Good. You understand my concern. You have been rather,” she paused with a hiss, “erratic as of late.”

“So I hear,” Despara said curtly, irritated that her mother had gone to Hordak with her concerns. “I’m sure your thoughts on the matter are answer enough as to why you are here. I have never before needed an escort.”

Shadow Weaver crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes in reaction to her daughter’s tone. “Hordak ordered me to meet you here. Besides that, I wanted to make sure that you understood the gravity of the situation.”

Despara sighed lightly. “Do not worry, Mother. The mission will be a success, as all of those I’ve undertaken before it have been.” She walked past Shadow Weaver without another word and boarded the ship, its entrance slipping closed behind her. Sitting down in front of the piloting console, she glanced out the viewport to see Shadow Weaver leave. Her mother’s seeing her off angered her. She didn’t need a nursemaid. She wondered if Hordak had told Shadow

Weaver to meet her here in an attempt to get under her skin. He enjoyed doing just that from time to time; it was just another way that he would test her. Removing her mask, Despara placed it on the floor behind her seat. She rubbed her temples gently, taking a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to her surroundings without the aid of the mask's visual enhancements. *No matter*, she thought. She was now on her way and on her own. It was strange that she would not have any of her troopers with her on this exercise, but in the end, it may have been just as well. If this truly was only a retrieval mission, they would most likely just get in her way, anyway. More likely than not, she would be able to retrieve whatever it was Hordak was after with little interference.

Taking in the sight of the console in front of her, she saw that it was familiar to her, for it was similar to many of the Horde's fighters. That was a good thing, at least, as it meant she wouldn't have to learn the controls on the fly. Looking closer, she noticed two buttons highlighted by magical lettering that glowed in a phosphorescent blue, much the same way her father had marked the ancient maps in his collection that he did not wish to damage. They said "Elesian" and "Etheria," in turn. *Simple enough*, Despara thought. She initiated the pre-flight sequence on the ship and when it was ready, she reached for the U-shaped flight control handle and eased it toward her and down, lifting the ship up from its platform and into the air. Pushing the controls forward, the Force Captain felt the ship glide away from the deck in near silence as she keyed in an exit code. The door to the outside world at the other end of the hangar began to rise, impressive in its scope and size. She flew out of the tower and drove the ship upward in a sharp arc, entering the lower atmosphere of Etheria before breaking through to the cold void of space.

Glancing down at her console, Despara pressed the button labeled "Elesian" carefully, wondering silently how this mysterious guidance system worked. A series of musical tones, loud and electronically synthesized, carried throughout her small fighter through its com system, causing her to raise her eyebrow curiously before she felt her body shudder involuntarily. For some reason, the tones caused a deep-seated fear to rush through her, the likes of which she had never felt before. The musical tones struck her as odd, affecting not only her ears with their sound, but her body as well. She felt strange and unsettled. Despite these odd sensations, nothing could have prepared her for what happened next. Through her viewport, she saw bright lights appear in front of her ship, small and numerous, shining in the darkness. The display possessed every color she had seen, and some she had not. They spun rapidly in a circular motion before expanding, a vortex appearing in the center of a ring of light. It looked like a whirlpool; some type of tear in space and time. It was

unnatural. Despara felt another surge of fear course through her body as the vortex pulled her ship toward it with a sudden tug and the normally stoic and controlled Force Captain fought the urge to cry out in panic as the lights devoured her ship whole, causing it to disappear within the mysterious portal.

Immediately after being pulled into the vortex, Despara once again found herself in the black void of space. Her fighter spun wildly and she fought to get it back under control. As she righted it, the ship's sensors blared as the spinning circle of bright lights, now behind her, vanished suddenly. Had she simply passed through it with no result? She felt as if she were still in her home system. *What was that all about?* she thought. *I haven't gone anywhere at all.* Her monitors showed a large planetary mass at her rear. Turning the ship around, she felt her breath catch in her throat. It was not her home planet of Etheria before her, as she had expected, but the planet her father had called "Elesian." The large planet, which looked to be mostly covered in water, filled her viewport, its nearest star burning an angry blue behind it, pulsating violently as it neared its death. She had arrived. *Ninety galaxies in mere seconds,* she thought. *How is that possible?* Despara suppressed a shudder. Even from this distance, she could see large explosions on the planet below and unlike the unfamiliar and bizarre looking ships that were fleeing it, she eased her fighter forward and raced to the planet below. *This may not be as easy as I had originally thought,* she thought to herself. She punched the accelerator, eager to complete her mission and leave this galaxy, which was soon to be a graveyard of dead planets and countless alien souls.

6.

ANCIENT ARTIFACTS

Adam and Evil-Lyn, or “Evelyn,” as she had resumed calling herself, sat across from each other on the floor, deep in the bowels of the Zalesian temple. Having removed her large cloak, Adam saw that Evelyn was attired quite differently from how he remembered her. A long purple skirt, slit up the right leg, had replaced the half-skirt she had once worn. Billowy sleeves, cut open like a dancer’s, covered the length of her arms. A high black collar stood out from her elegantly embroidered purple top, its plunging neckline a not-so-subtle reminder that she was not as modest as the rest of her outfit would lead one to believe. A jeweled pendant hung from her neck on a silver chain. She looked young and beautiful; not appearing at all to be the age that Adam knew she was, nearly the same as his father. Magic had a way of extending one’s youth and Evelyn had certainly benefited from that aspect of it. She appeared to be no older than his wife, Teela, and remained almost as beautiful.

The room they occupied was where Evelyn had made her home. She had shielded it from him with both a spell and a hidden wall during his search, preventing him from seeing it until she had allowed him to. Adam noted silently that there wasn’t much to see anyway. Glancing about the room, he observed little in the way of personal items or furniture, other than a bed and a simple

cooking area. Evelyn had given up much to be here, and the Eternian king couldn't help but wonder why. Did she still feel a connection to this place where she had spent her childhood? Perhaps, but even if so, there didn't seem to be much to these ruins and he wondered what the woman did to occupy her time. "Why Zalesia?" he asked. "Why return here? There's not much left."

She shot him a look that said it was none of his business, and he was surprised that she answered him despite it. "It's the only home I have. More than that, there is a power here that..." she trailed off. "You wouldn't understand."

"You'd be surprised what I'd understand. Castle Grayskull held much power, as you know. Is there something like that here in Zalesia as well?"

She nodded, somewhat surprised at his astuteness. "Yes. This temple's purpose was the protection of magical artifacts, powerful pieces of history that, if they were to fall into the wrong hands, would not be good for the people of this world."

He laughed awkwardly. "Your hands aren't so clean."

"Don't judge me, Eternian. I am no longer who I once was. In many ways, I was never destined to be, and you know that. You claim to have read the journal. You know that I was to be the Sorceress of Grayskull after Kuduk Ungol's death. You Eternians claim your dreams are so important," she scoffed. "It was due to a dream," she emphasized the word, "that I had my life's purpose taken from me. I've often wondered whether Ungol caused me to become the person that I was due to her rejection of me, or if I would have travelled down that path on my own."

"What's your conclusion?" he asked.

She sighed lightly. "I used to blame her, but in the end, she wasn't the one who made my decisions for me. I wasn't a slave to her. I believe now that everyone controls their own destiny. It was when I made that revelation that I delivered the journal to your father and left Snake Mountain forever. It was the first good decision I'd made in many years." She paused before speaking once more. "Gods, I'm getting soft," she added with a touch of disgust.

He smiled awkwardly, not quite knowing how to act around this woman. He'd spent so many years fighting Evil-Lyn and her fellow warriors when she'd served Skeletor that it was hard to accept that she, or anyone else for that matter, could just change like that, overnight. But then it probably happened little

by little over the years, he reasoned, and maybe that was never who she truly had been anyway. Everyone gets lost sometimes. Evelyn had just stayed lost longer than most. “So if you control your destiny, why come back here?” he asked. “Why not somewhere else that’s not so,” he took a moment to find the right word, “desolate?”

She didn’t seem to mind the apt description. “I came here in an attempt to hide from Skeletor, who I was sure would seek me out to exact his vengeance. No one knows this temple as well as I do. I grew up here. It was the safest place for me to hide. Besides protecting the artifacts that are housed here, there is also the simple fact that Tellus has been reenergized. I didn’t understand why before, but now I know that it was your dispersing the power of Grayskull into the planet that has given it new life. I feel that life pulsating around me at all times. There are ley lines that connect different places on this planet, and that connect this planet to others. The most powerful of these once passed underneath Grayskull. With it gone, the strongest now pass beneath us, beneath this very temple. Regardless of the choices that I made in my youth, those that I made later in my life still mattered. My destiny came to me, despite my past. I was not able to be the Sorceress of Grayskull, as I had once wanted, but now I can fulfill my duty to Tellus in a different way, here in Zalesia. Here, I protect the very planet itself. I feel its energies and channel them where they are needed. In a way, my role as Sorceress of Zalesia is vastly more important than the role I once thought that I would play as the guardian of that old castle. This temple existed eons before Grayskull’s first brick was laid. It’s only fitting that it would outlive it.”

“So you’re not as retired as I had thought?” he asked with a soft laugh.

“Not exactly, Adam. Not exactly.” She smiled. “But you and your people have nothing to fear from me.” After a long silence, wherein both of them tried to become more comfortable in the presence of the other, Evelyn spoke once more. “Why are you so convinced that your father is alive?”

He shrugged. “It’s hard to explain,” he said. “It’s just something that I feel. More than that, it’s begun only recently. When he first disappeared into Despondos, I felt nothing.”

She nodded. “Despondos is difficult to sense, even for a powerful sorcerer.”

“So I’ve been told. I’ve gone to several mages and wizards for help, but none could sense him. I feel now though that he’s somehow moved on and left Despondos, that maybe that’s why I feel this way only now, and not before. Do

you think that you can you help me?”

She nodded, reaching for her familiar staff. “I believe that I can at least find out if he is still alive. I can promise you no more than that.” The staff was shorter than the last time he’d seen it. She’d used it as a physical weapon at one time, as well as a magical one. The shortening of its shaft was curious, but Adam still knew that it was indeed very powerful and now probably easier to wield, making it even more deadly than before in a way. “So now that you’ve come to someone who deals in more than just simple parlor tricks, let’s see what we can find out,” Evelyn said with a slight smile. She began to whisper an incantation and with the spoken words, the orb upon her staff, usually clear, began to glow and fill with colored smoke which swirled about within it. Suddenly, she struck the floor between them with the base of the staff and pulled her hand away. The staff stayed upright, suspended by her magic. It began to spin and as it did, the smoke from within left it, whirling between them in the air. After a moment, the smoke formed a circle and began to take on shapes within it. Before Adam could see anything, the darkest colors spread out, filling the void with darkness, where they stopped.

“This darkness,” he began, “is this Despondos?”

“I don’t know,” she answered softly, “but I don’t think so. Now be silent, or you risk breaking the spell.”

They sat and stared at the blackness for another minute before it was swept away, as if a door were opening, shedding light upon a small room. After his eyes adjusted to what he was seeing, Adam knew that that was exactly what had happened. His father sat in the corner of a small cell. Once bathed in darkness, the sudden light caused the man to shield his eyes. A prisoner. His father was imprisoned somewhere! Although the thought filled him with dread, Adam could not help but feel a joyous sensation as a chaser to it. His father was alive! It was at that moment that Adam first saw the woman in a hooded red robe speaking to his father. She quickly snapped her gaze toward them, her glowing eyes staring directly at Adam and Evelyn, somehow seeing them looking in on her. She waved her hand across the open air in front of her and the image faded. Adam jumped up in alarm. “What happened?” he asked. “Did she see us? Even if so, bring it back, please! I must know what it means!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Evelyn replied, meeting his gaze evenly. “I know who that woman was, Adam. She couldn’t have seen us. It’s more than likely that she just sensed a presence. We are safe. Your father, however, is in grave danger.”



After having Evelyn explain to him that the woman in the vision was called Shadow Weaver and that his father was being held by The Horde, Adam sat in silence for several minutes before speaking. “This man who’s holding my father, this Hordak,” he paused. “He’s the one who kidnapped my sister. Do you know why? You and Skeletor served him at the time of her abduction.”

She met his gaze evenly. “I have no idea why she was taken, but Hordak doesn’t do anything without purpose. And your memory is poor. Hordak abandoned us that day.”

“I remember,” he said, recalling the story in her journal. “I’m sorry. I’m a little rattled, is all.”

“I understand, but there is one other thing that I must mention. You referred to Hordak as a man, but he is no mere mortal. All of the scariest stories you heard about as a child, all of the monsters you conjured in your mind, afraid that they were under your bed, or in your closet, ready to devour you?” She shook her head. “They are nothing compared to him. He is the foulest creature I’ve ever encountered, and I saw many in my travels amongst the stars. I never served Hordak willingly. Not after he violated my mind and body the day of Keldor’s transformation. I followed Skeletor to the stars with Hordak because I couldn’t bear to let Keldor go. If I had realized that Keldor was dead inside of him then, and stayed behind—” she trailed off.

“Many things could have been different,” Adam finished for her.

She shook her head. “I would have been dead. But that’s beside the point. It’s too late for that now. I’ve held onto the past long enough as it is.”

“But my father, Evelyn, do you know where he is? Do you know where Hordak is keeping him?” Adam pleaded.

She nodded. “I have an idea, yes. Hordak is the lord of many worlds. He divides the duties of ruling them amongst his most elite generals, and they report directly to him. He rules from one location, seldom moving, to protect himself. Or at least he used to. That was a long time ago.”

“Please, Evelyn,” he pleaded. “If you know anything, I beg of you to tell me. You’ve said it yourself; Hordak does everything with a purpose. If he’s keeping my father alive, it’s for a reason, but who knows how long he’ll need him. I’ll need to act fast if I’m going to save him.”

She laughed, surprising him. “Save him? You? He-Man might have been able to do it. Might. But you? You’d die as soon as you arrived.”

“That’s my choice to make, folly or not,” he said solemnly. “Please. What does it hurt you to tell me?”

“Any move against Hordak is unwise,” she replied, “even my telling you his location.”

“I wouldn’t go alone. I would bring my army,” he countered. “It is the most powerful on all of Tellus.”

“A mistake countless others have made over the centuries, Adam. Regardless of the pride and faith you have in your men, your army’s might is nothing compared to The Horde’s,” she retorted coolly. “Hordak would destroy you and your men. Then he would journey here to eliminate every other army on Tellus for your hubris. To make such a move would bring doom to all of us. It would be impossible, anyway.”

“So you still fear him?” he asked in an attempt to challenge her pride.

Her eyes lit up with an inner fire. “Of course I do, you fool! And you would be wise to, as well. You have a family back in Eternia that still lives, Adam. Go back to them. Your father is dead, or as good as.”

“No thanks to you and your journal,” he replied angrily. “Without that blasted book, none of this would have happened.” He pointed his finger at her accusingly, about to continue, but she knocked it aside.

“And without my delivering that journal to your father,” she cut him off, “Skeletor would still be here on Tellus, and the world itself would still be split by darkness.”

He sat in silence for a long moment. “Look, I don’t expect you to understand. It’s just something that I have to do. He’s my father.”

Evelyn sighed and stood up, retrieving her staff as she did so from where it had fallen after the veil had closed. “If you are going to go on this ridiculous quest, this suicide mission, then you will have to go alone, or nearly so.” She hesitated, as if making an important decision. “You can’t bring an army, but

you're going to need some help regardless. Come with me." She turned to leave and Adam followed close behind.

As they headed even deeper into the ruins, Adam felt a familiar sensation, as if every hair on his body was standing on end. It reminded him of the feeling that he would get whenever he entered Castle Grayskull; the feeling that magic surrounded him.

"It's the ley lines," Evelyn said, sensing their effect on him. "The pull of Tellus's magic is strong here. That's why this temple was built here in this desert valley, just as Grayskull was built where it was located, each at the crossing of powerful lines. In the time since Castle Grayskull has been gone, the Temple of Zalesia has grown stronger. It's as if a dam was destroyed, rerouting the magic back here like water. Long before Grayskull was built, it was Zalesia that was the fulcrum of Tellus's magic. I didn't understand why the power had returned to this place until you told me of Grayskull's fate, but now it all makes sense. Balance has been restored and with it, Zalesia's purpose."

Adam merely nodded, not fully understanding. He wasn't as familiar as he should be with Preternian history, the large span of time before the dawn of Eternia, his home. "Where are we going?" he asked as they left behind the Zalesian-made structure and entered a large cave. He could hear running water before his eyes adjusted, allowing him to see the river flowing adjacent to their path.

"We're headed to the chamber where the relics are stored. You may not know this, but this cavern connects to another like it beneath Grayskull, however it was always impossible to approach it from here. If it were not, Skeletor would have attempted it." She pointed to the flowing water as she spoke. "You may have already guessed, but this river was comprised of lava before Tellus was healed."

Adam gazed at his surroundings. They made their way down a narrow rock walkway that matched the flow of the river beside them. Torches on the walls lit their path, igniting seemingly of their own accord as the two of them approached, though Adam knew it was Evelyn's magic causing the sudden flares. Phosphorescent growths on the walls and floor also aided them, their dim light helping Adam to find his footing in this strange place. "Why are we going to the chamber?"

"You have the reunited Sword of Power, but even it is not enough for your journey." Their path widened as they reached a massive iron door inlaid into the wall. They came to a halt and Evelyn spoke a short incantation. The heavy door

swung open to the inside of a vast treasure room, only instead of treasure, it was filled with magical artifacts too numerous to count. “Skeletor acquired the Havok Staff from this vault long ago with my help. My father was once its guardian, but I betrayed him for the man I thought I loved.”

“Where is your father now?” Adam asked. He had encountered her father, the being known as The Faceless One, during his time as He-Man, but it had been many years since Adam had seen or heard of him.

“I don’t know,” she answered shortly. “Now come with me.” She walked deep into the room, nearly every inch of which was covered in various trinkets. The walls were lined with staffs and weapons, the floor with enchanted coins and jewels. Pedestals rose up from the piles of artifacts, holding those that Adam assumed somehow held more significance than the others. Evelyn approached one with a fist-sized blue jewel and removed it, walking it back toward him. It was smooth, polished, and oval in shape.

“What is it?” he asked.

“This artifact dates back to Preternian times, where it is said to have come from the stars. The legend states that a great wizard named Ro brought it to Tellus when he crash-landed here after a skirmish with The Horde. Rumor has it that it even fell into the hands of King Grayskull, your ancestor. How it came to be in Zalesia, I don’t know, but it will be useful to you. Known as the ‘Spellstone,’ it is more commonly referred to as the ‘Stone of Protection’ and it does pretty much what it sounds like it does.”

“How does it work?” Adam inquired as he eyed the jewel curiously. It didn’t appear very impressive apart from its size, but he’d seen plenty of magical artifacts during his time as He-Man and he knew not to judge one on appearances alone.

“Let me have your sword,” Evelyn said.

“You made me leave it behind,” he answered.

“Oh, yes, I’d forgotten.” With a wave of her hand in the air, it appeared in her grasp, trailing a wisp of smoke. “Well, that was easy enough.”

Adam’s eyes widened in shock. “How did you—”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said, cutting him off. “It only works when I know where something is and I saw where you had left it, remember?” She took the sword in her left hand and hefted the Stone of Protection in her right. “Now then,

I hope this works.”

“What is it exactly that you’re—” the rest of his sentence was drowned out by a loud boom as Evelyn brought the stone and the sword together in a blinding display of light. When the light faded and Adam’s eyes had readjusted, he saw that the stone and the sword were now fused, the stone imbedded just above the hilt of his weapon. As it faded from blue to silver, it appeared as if it had always been there, that it belonged.

“The stone can be bound to any weapon, Adam, apparently even to the Sword of Power.” She held the weapon out to him and he took it in his hands slowly and with caution. “I present to you the Sword of Protection. Use it well. You’ll need it.”

“Thank you, but I still don’t know where I’m going,” he said, slightly dazed by witnessing the sword undergoing yet another transformation.

“The world you need to travel to is called Etheria. Hordak established it as his new base shortly before he left your uncle and I stranded here. While I don’t know for certain that Etheria is where your father is located, I doubt Hordak has abandoned his base there yet. It’s the most likely place you’ll find him.”

“Where is Etheria? How far do I need to travel to get there?” As he asked this, he thought of his wife Teela back at home, and the fact that their child would be born soon. He would not miss the birth of his son for anything. He had made a promise.

“You won’t be able to reach it by conventional means, Adam,” she answered. “It lies in a dimension parallel to this one.”

“Then how?” he asked. “It sounds impossible.”

She shook her head. “Not if you have a dimensional key, an enchanted item that can open a portal to take you there.”

Adam waited for her to give him one, but she simply stood there. Seeing the look on her face, he shrugged. “What?”

“I take it you don’t have one?” she asked.

He glanced around the massive room, indicating the many treasures that surrounded them. “I would have thought that you had one.”

“I’m afraid not,” she replied. After a moment of consideration, she spoke once more. “I know of one, though: Skeletor’s Havok Staff. Was it lost with

him?”

The Havok Staff, Adam realized, had last been seen during his final battle with Skeletor. He'd remembered to take the Sword of Darkness, Skeletor's half of the Power Sword, with him, but the staff had been left behind in the confusion of his father and Skeletor being swept into Despondos, and Duncan's mortal injury. In his and Teela's rush to get her father to the Sorceress of Grayskull, the Havok Staff had been the furthest thing from their minds. “No, it wasn't lost, but it was left behind,” he paused, “at Snake Mountain.”

“Then you need to retrieve it,” she told him sternly.

“You can't just pull it out of the air like my sword?” he asked.

“Only if I knew exactly where it was and I don't,” she answered, obviously frustrated. “Just knowing it's at Snake Mountain isn't enough.”

Adam sighed, annoyed with himself that he'd left the staff in such a vile place, even more so that he hadn't even thought of it since that fateful day. Nevertheless, Evelyn had been of great help to him. She'd started him on this journey when she could have stayed hidden by her spell and simply waited for him to leave that morning. “Thank you for everything, Evelyn. You've gotten me started, and that's more than I can ask of you.”

“You can't enter Snake Mountain alone, even if Tellus is restored,” she said. “It's too dangerous. I fear that foul place is just as deadly as ever.”

“If I can't survive that, I'll never survive Etheria,” Adam said, matter-of-factly.

“True, but the purpose of this temple is the protection of magical artifacts, remember? I can't just let something like the Havok Staff gather dust in that place. Besides, I am partly responsible for all of this,” she said. “I'm coming with you, Adam. You can use the staff to get to your father and when you're finished, I expect to get it back.”

7.

AT THE WORLD'S END

Explosions from nearby structures rocked Despara's fighter during her descent into the planet called Elesian's lower atmosphere. She gritted her teeth as she navigated through the densely populated city her father's device had led her towards. The planet was at war. The inevitable explosion of its life-giving star had sent the creatures of the distant world into a panic. Most of the planet's inhabitants had simply evacuated, as she had seen upon her initial approach. The rest had apparently seen fit to settle old disputes before their lives were snuffed out in spectacular fashion. Even here, ninety odd galaxies away from the one she called home, war and death reigned. The sky was lit up with a perpetual blue haze. Despara was unsure if this was normal for this world, or if it was a byproduct of the dying star nearby.

Narrowly avoiding yet another collision with an escaping ship screaming for the void of space, she cursed under her breath. If the Elesians did not possess hyperlight drives, then all of the beings on the escaping ships were as good as dead already, they just didn't know it. Without the ability to enter hyperspace, they would never get far enough away in time to escape the blast. Even if that were so, it didn't stop them from trying. Landing here was going to be difficult enough, to say nothing of actually locating an item about which she

had no real specifics. Despara felt herself growing angry. She didn't even know what it was she was looking for. Then there was the added problem of escaping Elesian before its inevitable destruction. If her ship were damaged, including the mysterious new guidance system that was her only hope of returning home, she was doomed. She had no qualms about laying her life down for the glory of The Horde, but she'd at least like to know the reason why.

The electronic tracking device that Despara's father had given her had been beeping incessantly since entering the lower atmosphere and she knew that she was getting close. She lowered the ship and landed safely on top of a towering skyscraper, despite the carnage all around her. She chose the unusual spot because she feared that if she landed on the ground, her ship could be somehow broken into and stolen by an Elesian native looking to escape. It would not be easy to do, but Despara had no idea what kind of technology the Elesians had at their disposal. She would take no chances.

The atmospheric readings on her ship's console showed that the air here was toxic to her human lungs. Thankfully, her mask was outfitted with a filter that would allow her to breathe. She had travelled to many different planets during her service to Hordak and it had been necessary to include the feature. It had always been intended, as much of her uniform was, to inspire fear. A large oxygen tank wouldn't be intimidating and simply would not do. As she fastened the mask to her suit and engaged its breather, she was thankful that it worked the way it did. She needed to be agile and having to carry a cumbersome tank on a mission like this could cost Despara her life.

Walking to the rear of her small ship, she fastened her belt around her waist. She left her swords behind, instead grabbing twin blaster pistols and attaching their holsters to her belt. The two holsters then wrapped around her thighs, where she fastened them tight. Still feeling unequipped for the mission, Despara reached up and pulled down a blaster rifle. It was a two-handed weapon, but she was able to attach her father's device to the rear of her belt, so she would have both hands free. She left her cape aboard the ship as she reached for the door's release lever. Capes were good for formal-wear, or intimidation, but this mission required speed and maneuverability. No capes.

While the entry door of her ship lowered, she checked her weapons' power cells. All were full and ready to go. As she slung the rifle's strap over her head and right shoulder, a rush of air escaped her fighter as it was sucked into the strange atmosphere of Elesian. She leaped out onto the roof of the building and gauged her surroundings. She felt little wind, which seemed strange for a building this tall. There did not seem to be any activity and she felt that the

building may have already been evacuated. Her ship should be safe here. Despara carried a homing beacon that would guide the ship to her location when she was ready to leave. She just hoped that, with all of the chaos surrounding her, the building didn't topple before that could happen.

The gravity was lighter than Etheria's and she was unable to properly walk as she was used to. Instead she took long strides that carried her as far as ten feet with each leap. She covered the perimeter of the building until she discovered that her father's device beeped the most on the northern side. She eased herself as carefully as the light gravity would allow to the edge of the roof and looked down. A block away lay a squat building that stood out among its neighbors as being an older structure. A museum, perhaps? It looked like one. It was funny how, even this far from home, things tended to look the same. She was in fact surprised to find that much of the Elesian architecture had characteristics in common with that of the Fright Zone itself. With that thought, Despara figured that the museum-like building was as good a place as any to start looking. She jumped back three times, giving herself room for a "running" start. She didn't have time to do this the easy way. She leaped forward once again, each lunge propelling moving her along a little faster in the low gravity. As she reached the edge of the building, she jumped off of it, soaring out into the open air.

She spread her legs and arms out wide to create as much resistance as possible as she fell both forward and down at a rate that surprised her. Despite the planet's light gravity field, she was descending faster than she had anticipated. Too fast. The wind buffeted against her during her fall, also stronger than it had seemed from the top of the building. She considered the possibilities for the differences and came to the conclusion that there must have been some sort of force-field located around the skyscraper to protect it from the planet's high winds. With winds as powerful as these, she should have been pulled right off of the roof, along with her ship. While a field such as this was a good thing for her ship, it would at least protect it while she searched, it didn't do her much good against the forces of nature that were currently knocking her about. They were causing her to drift much too far to the west of her target, and were also driving her down to the surface at a dangerous speed.

Luck, it would seem, was on her side. Below her, an Elesian ship was struggling to gain altitude, dipping and diving as it fought a losing battle to rise. It was a small ship, most likely a personal aircraft. The important thing was that it was big enough for her to land on. She rolled gently to her left, letting the winds take her closer to the ship. She had to time this just right. If she landed on it as it was ascending, it would pound her into jelly. She had to land as it was

descending, to soften the blow. The ship rose and fell rhythmically as she approached it and she began to count the intervals between out loud to herself. It was erratic, but the ship seemed to drop, on average, about every six seconds. Despara could feel a bead of sweat form on her forehead despite her suit's temperature controls as she came closer to the struggling aircraft. Her descent wasn't timed right. As it stood, she would meet the ship as it was rising. Not good. She had to change the variables.

Pulling her arms and legs tight together, she cut through the air at a higher speed, changing her rate of descent slightly. She was close enough to the ship as it rose that she could have reached out and touched it, but at the last possible moment before impact, it dropped. She spread her arms and legs once more in an effort to slow her fall. The ship had dropped, but she smacked into it with an audible thump nonetheless, despite her efforts. She had attempted to slow her descent, but the wind that had been pushing back up at her had been blocked by the ship itself, making her last-minute attempt useless. "Idiot!" she yelled aloud, fighting to gain a handhold on the alien craft as she slid across its smooth surface. She was at least thankful that the impact had not killed her. Without the protection of her armored mask, she surely would have at least been knocked unconscious, leaving her to fall to a likely death below.

Moments before sliding off the edge of the ship, she managed to grab hold of some strange type of antenna that rose from the craft's rear, steadying herself. Hanging near the ship's propulsion units, she caught sight of a plug flapping about, having come free from its port. It was most likely the reason that the ship was struggling to ascend, or at least she assumed. She didn't know anything about this world's technology, true, but it was easy enough to recognize that the plug was something amiss. She stretched her right arm as far as she could and was able to grab the wildly flopping object. She guided the plug into its port and felt the ship lurch forward and up. She let go of the antenna and fell to the ground at a much slower speed than before. The nearby buildings were blocking the planet's high winds enough that she was merely at the mercy of gravity alone, and it was not strong enough on its own to kill her. She tucked and rolled as she hit the surface, skidding to a stop nearly a dozen blocks away from her target. She looked up to see the ship she had landed on streaking for the heavens. She wished them luck. They had saved her life after all and, even if they were not aware, she had potentially saved theirs in return.

Despara pulled her rifle from over her shoulder. It had gotten a bit banged up in the fall, but it wasn't anything a weapon made in the Fright Zone factories couldn't handle. She could hear shooting all around her as the chaos continued. The blue haze that pervaded this planet made it difficult to see, but her mask was

beginning to account for it by adjusting the spectrum to closer resemble what she was used to. The Force Captain wasn't one hundred percent sure, but she thought that she was about ten blocks too far to the west. Due to the circumstances of her not knowing exactly what her target was, and the fact that this entire place could be destroyed at any time, Despara didn't feel the need for subtlety in her approach. Instead of looking for cover, she made her way east right down the center of the street, making large leaps in the light gravity.

She made it three blocks through the strange and foreign city before she was noticed, the Elesian aliens coming out from behind their cover to blast at her with their weapons, which made a bizarre hum before letting out a "pitchaw" sound. Despara recognized that the hum was the weapon warming up before it could fire and that there was a delay between the warming up and the actual firing that gave her the advantage. Her weaponry was more advanced and had no such delay. She wasn't interested in who was on which side of this war and shot back with little regard for her enemies. They all seemed to have her in their crosshairs anyway, each side taking a keen interest in their strange visitor. With the star about to go supernova, all of the natives who stayed behind were already dead, anyway. Which side they were on and what they believed in made no difference to her.

Continuing to make her way toward her original destination, she took in the sight of the Elesian natives. They were tall, nearly four heads taller than she was, but were thin and insect-like. They looked weak. Their falling after one shot of Despara's weapon showed that looks were not deceiving in this case. Only three blocks from her goal, Despara grunted as a small explosion hurled her violently into the side of a nearby building. She heard a "pang" as a small cylinder bounced off of the wall next to her. *Some type of grenade*, she thought. This second one hadn't gone off, leading her to think that perhaps it was a dud. She was about to find out. Despara dove for the explosive device, picking it up and throwing it back in the direction it had come from. It exploded upon impact and she heard the high-pitched chittering of her attacker as it stumbled out from behind its cover and fell dead in the street.

She stood and brushed the dust from her suit briefly before picking up her rifle and continuing. Four Elesians walked out into the street, blocking her path. Apparently, she'd made enemies with that last kill. The masked girl lifted her rifle and pulled its trigger. Instead of firing, it gave her a mild electrical shock, in reality a large number of volts, but she had once again been protected by her suit. She looked the rifle over and saw that a piece of shrapnel had impaled it from the right side. Her armor had protected her from the grenade's blast, but the same couldn't be said for her weapon. She dropped it to the ground as a

cacophony of humming and “pitchaws” filled her ears, the four Elesians shooting wildly in her direction. She tucked and rolled to her right, finding cover behind what appeared to be a vehicle of some sort. She drew her twin pistols from their holsters and, seeing her enemies in a building’s reflective surface, shot back in their direction. She narrowly missed three of them, but managed to strike one square in the chest. It went down with a whimper.

The Elesian natives looked to their fallen comrade and Despara took advantage of their confusion. She picked up a piece of rubble from one of the explosions and threw it at a nearby vehicle in an attempt to convince the natives that she had moved to a different cover. Upon hearing the banging sound it made as it hit, they swallowed the bait expertly, firing at the second vehicle and sending it up in red flames. While they were turned, Despara rose up calmly from where she hid and fired three times, each one a precise headshot that brought them down one by one. She began making fast strides in the direction of the building she assumed was a museum and noticed that few challenged her from that point on. One struck at her from an alley, but a well-placed jumping knee to the head put it down and seemed to stall any other attacks that the Elesians had planned. *That’s it*, she thought. *Just ignore me and go back to killing each other.*

Despara reached the building without further interruption and leapt up the front steps, taking multiples at a time due to the planet’s low gravity. She could hear her father’s device beeping incessantly and was thankful that it had not been damaged. Entering the building, she saw that it was, in fact, a museum, or at least what she would consider one. Bizarre organic art pulsed on the walls and pillars of various sizes held up what, to her, were abstract sculptures. They could have represented anything, but knowing next to nothing about this planet, she couldn’t begin to guess at their meanings. She couldn’t help but find herself in awe of the works, which were unlike anything else she’d seen during her travels throughout the stars. It was a shame that the strange sculptures would soon be destroyed when Elesian’s star died its inevitable death. Bringing her thoughts back to the mission at hand, she walked deeper into the small structure, soon coming upon a large stone wall. Etched into it were many designs, which she interpreted as stars and planets. It seemed to depict space, a point in the universe that, if it were real, she did not recognize. Though, this far away from her home, she didn’t find that the least bit surprising.

What she did find surprising was the lone ship at the center of the stone carving. It bore a familiar shape, like an older model Horde scout ship. The bat-like symbol etched upon it settled the matter. It was indeed a Horde ship. She had no idea how the Elesians recorded time, but the etching appeared to be very

old. It was the centerpiece of the museum's collection, all paths leading to it. What did it mean? Hordak's device let out a shrill sustained pitch of sound before silencing itself. *Is this what you were after, Father? An entire wall? How am I supposed to bring such a thing back to you?* She holstered her left blaster pistol. Running her free hand along the wall's surface, she felt the Horde ship, positioned slightly above her head. Perhaps it was a separate piece that she could detach? Upon placing her right hand on it, she felt her body temperature rise and a shudder rushed through her. It was not unlike what she felt before her instantaneous journey to this planet. Without warning, the wall sounded a musical tone, not unlike the ones she'd heard coming from her ship before her arrival here.

"Curious," she said aloud to no one at all. Pulling a small recording device from her belt, she turned it on, recording the steady tone as she tried to make sense of what her father wanted. Suddenly, the whole building began to shake and the ancient wall crumbled to dust before her eyes, the carving of the Horde ship along with it, the tone suddenly going silent. There was no way to retrieve the ship now. The end of this planet was near and she had failed. Turning, Despara scrambled for the entrance, knocking over artifacts and sculptures as she made her way. She hated to destroy the fascinating works in her reckless haste, but she consoled herself by remembering that it was all about to be obliterated anyway. Making her way through the entrance, she returned the recording device to her belt and pulled out her ship's homing beacon, pressing its locator button firmly until it lit up with a red glow.

Panic filled the streets as The Horde's Force Captain burst out of the building's entrance, the remnants of the Elesian people no longer caring about their petty squabbles or her presence here, instead looking to the sky where their once life-giving star pulsated and expanded, ready to destroy them all in spectacular fashion. A few gasped and pointed as her ship screamed down from the tall skyscraper to hover in front of the building, low to the ground. The planet shook with quakes, causing some of the surrounding buildings to crumble and fall. Her ship hovered steadily as it awaited her. Some of the more heavily armed natives ran for the fighter in an attempt to escape but the Force Captain leapt from the steps, firing wildly into their direction as the low gravity carried her all the way into the opening door. She quickly turned and hit the lever that closed it. Despara couldn't help but notice the Elesian's desperate looks as the door closed between them. "Sorry, no passengers," she said quietly.

She turned and ran toward the cockpit as her ship's internal atmosphere normalized. She crashed into the pilot's chair and punched the accelerator, pulling the control handles back as she did so, forcing the ship roughly into the

air, heading for the void of space. Before she had even left the upper atmosphere, she pressed down hard on the button that read “Etheria.” Musical tones once again filled her communications system, only this time in a different order, creating a different tune. The bright rainbow of lights swirled into a portal in front of her. She flew into it with abandon, eager to leave this doomed place behind. The portal closed behind her ship and she was gone.

Back in Elesian’s planetary system, the giant star pulsed and grew, breathing its last figurative breath before exploding in a beautiful flash of light that obliterated everything around it, including Elesian itself.

8.

RETURN TO SNAKE MOUNTAIN

“My Sky Sled only has room for one, so I’m not sure how you plan to tag along.” Adam glanced toward Evelyn with a puzzled expression as he finished re-packing his belongings into the leather satchels he’d hung from his vehicle. He hadn’t brought much, but it had taken him nearly an hour to reassemble everything.

Evelyn’s short hair blew about slightly in the gentle desert breeze. She pulled her collar higher in an effort to block it. “Don’t worry. I have my ways,” she said with a wry smile before letting out a sharp whistle. The action was followed by silence at first before Adam began to hear the familiar rumble of a giant cat. From around the left side of the temple the large purplish-black dylinx known as Panthor ran toward them. He stopped at Evelyn’s side and growled in Adam’s direction. “It’s alright, Panthor,” she said in a soothing voice, “he’s with me. Now, where did I leave that saddle?” She paused for a moment in thought. “Oh, yes.” With a wave of her hand, the saddle appeared before her in the air much as Adam’s sword had earlier. She placed it upon Panthor’s back and clasped it underneath his belly, rubbing his side all the while. Evelyn glanced in Adam’s direction as she mounted the dylinx and grinned. “Do try to keep up, your majesty.” With that, she was off, heading in the direction of Snake

Mountain, or what was left of it. Adam quickly leapt onto his Sky Sled and sped off in pursuit.



It didn't take long to reach Snake Mountain from the Zalesian ruins. They had long been neighbors. Zalesia was an ancient city, destroyed by the snake god Serpos before he had been turned to stone and imprisoned on this old mountain, making it the fearsome sight it was today. *Well*, Adam thought, *maybe not so much today*. Gazing upon the once familiar mountain that had long been home to Skeletor and his warriors, Adam was taken aback by the changes it had undergone. Lava no longer flowed from the mouth of the great serpent, or anywhere nearby, instead transformed into streams of life-giving water. The mountain itself, while still having Serpos embedded within and around it, was now covered with flowers, trees, and other new growth. Much of Serpos had been covered with a thick green moss, and while still an awesome site, the mountain no longer seemed quite as foreboding.

As if reading his mind, Evelyn spoke, turning her head back toward him from where she rode atop Panthor. "Don't let its appearance fool you. Snake Mountain is still likely to be a deadly place. The dangers that await us here will be new and different from what we would normally expect. Use caution."

Indeed, they came upon the mountain very cautiously; slowly and with every sense alert for danger. Riding near the entrance, Evelyn dismounted her pet and Adam did likewise after pulling up carefully on his Sky Sled. Adam noticed that Panthor was still staring at him as if he would make for a lovely dinner, but did his best to ignore the giant cat. The dylinx seemed to be obeying Evelyn and was leaving Adam alone, other than following him with his eyes at all times, still not sure if he could trust the Eternian king. "Should I bring anything?" he asked.

"Just your sword," she answered, "and some luck, if you have any with you." She removed her staff from its place upon Panthor's saddle and made her way toward the entrance of the mountain fortress: a cave at its base. Adam drew his newly transformed Power Sword, the Sword of Protection, and followed her.

Her staff's orb lit up brightly, illuminating their way as they entered the

darkness of the cave. Adam was quick to notice that the inside of Snake Mountain appeared to have remained relatively unchanged, with the exception of the water that now flowed through it as opposed to its once-familiar lava. All of the old twists and turns that he was familiar with were much the same as they always had been: dark and foreboding. After making their way up a rather steep incline for about a quarter of an hour, Adam and Evelyn both heard scratching and grunting sounds coming from up ahead. Hearing a growl at his back, Adam turned, startled, but felt a strange sense of relief to see the yellow eyes of Panthor at his rear, glinting in the light. It was certainly the first time he'd ever felt comfort at seeing the animal, especially when the large brute was sneaking up behind him.

He had often wondered how a creature as foul and evil as Skeletor could maintain a relationship with an animal like Panthor. He used to think it was merely magic or perhaps even cruelty that kept the beast in line. After reading Evelyn's journal, however, he'd come to learn that while a spell may have slightly aided in the calming of the beast around Skeletor when he was still known as Keldor, they truly did share a sort of bond, not unlike the bond that Adam felt with his pet tiger Cringer. *Love can truly be blind at times*, he thought. Panthor didn't care about what his master did, or who he hurt. He only knew him as his friend. The thought made Adam miss Cringer a great deal.

"Do you hear that?" Evelyn whispered.

"Panthor is with us," he answered.

"Yes, I know," she said, "but the sound I'm speaking of is coming from up ahead."

"I thought I'd heard something," he whispered back, "but I wasn't sure if it was just him or not."

She shook her head as she dimmed the light coming from her staff in an attempt to hide their presence. "No, it's not just Panthor. Look." She pointed to a rock outcropping directly ahead of them. After Adam's eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, he saw what she was trying to show him: Shadow Beasts. With the blackened skies of the Dark Hemisphere now gone, the large, horned beasts had had to find refuge in the darkness of caves. Snake Mountain was the perfect place for them to make their new home. "Blast," she hissed under her breath. "They fear the light, as you know, but trying to scare them is risky. There isn't really anywhere to go in here. It's doubtful they'd run away and much more likely that they would attack us if we provoked them. On the open ground, I wouldn't worry, but these close quarters would be the death of us." She stood silent for a

moment, lost in thought, before speaking once more. "I think now would be a good time to test out that sword."

Remembering the name of his newly transformed weapon, Adam looked cautiously at the beasts before whispering to Evelyn, "I suppose you're right." He held up the Sword of Protection and concentrated hard on not being seen. As if it knew what he was thinking, the Stone of Protection embedded in the weapon glowed with a blue light. The light surrounded Adam and his companions and, trusting in the power of the enchanted stone, they began to ease their way forward. Both Adam and Evelyn were surprised to find that the Shadow Beasts paid no attention to them as they passed, despite Panthor's constant growling in their direction. It was as if the beasts could not see or hear them at all.

Evelyn turned to him, her eyes wide. "I'm impressed," she said in a hushed tone, still being as quiet as possible despite the spell protecting them.

"Me too," he answered. "I don't really understand how the stone works, and had no idea if that would work or not. I guess I did bring some luck with me." The ancient artifact that protected them from sight and sound notwithstanding, they spent the rest of their time traveling in silence. After climbing the tall spiral staircase that led to the throne room, she and Adam entered. Evelyn sighed as she once again found herself in the room where she and Keldor had fought for their lives long ago against Hordak himself, just moments after her love's horrific transformation. Panthor purred slightly as he exhaled, happy to be home after nearly a year. He padded softly toward the throne and laid himself down in his usual spot beside it. The large dylinx gazed longingly toward the throne itself, missing his former master.

Somehow sensing that there was no longer any danger, the blue light that had surrounded them faded, the Stone of Protection reverting back to its neutral silver color. "Well," Evelyn said, "let's get to it then. The Havok Staff, where did you leave it?"

Adam scanned about the room quickly, figuring that the staff would catch his eye easily. It did not. He felt a pain in his chest as he caught sight of the space where the portal to Despondos had been opened by Skeletor; where he'd lost his father. Walking toward the corner where He-Man and Skeletor had fought their final battle, he looked all around, but saw nothing. "It should be here." He sighed heavily. "I don't understand."

Evelyn's brow furrowed in anger at his having lost a key relic of her people. "It's been a year. It could be in the hands of anyone by now."

“Let’s hope not,” he answered.

“Then where would it be, huh?” she growled, annoyed and angry. “I highly doubt one of those horn-headed, dumb-as-a-brick bipeds below us walked off with it.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said, his own voice rising. “Things happened so fast. Teela’s father was dying. We didn’t have time to take an inventory.”

“You’ve had a year since then,” she said accusingly.

“A year in which I haven’t been able to turn into He-Man, a year in which...” he trailed off.

“An entire year in which you’ve been afraid,” she finished for him. “Poor baby. You’re not seventeen anymore, Your Highness.” Her last words dripped with contempt. “Whether you like it or not, you’re the king now. It’s about time you behaved like a man and started acting like it.”

“You’re right,” he said quietly.

“I am?” she asked, seeming genuinely surprised.

“Yes. This quest for my father serves many purposes for me.” They were both silent a moment before he spoke again. “Is there any way that you can track the staff, use your magic to find it?”

She thought about the possibility for a long minute. “The Havok Staff is a very powerful artifact. If there were any artifact that I was going to be able to sense, it would be that one. Yes, I suppose I could try.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Look, I know this is awkward, being back in this place, especially with me, but I just want you to know that I appreciate your help.”

“What makes you think I’m doing this purely for you?” she asked. “I want to make sure the Havok Staff is in a safe place. If one is to believe that I am partly responsible for Randor’s disappearance, then it stands to reason that I also have a hand in the artifact’s being lost. At least when Skeletor had it, I knew where it was. Not knowing is far worse.” She sat on the floor as she had before, when seeking out Adam’s father Randor. Again, she struck the floor with her shortened staff and a magical veil formed in front of them. The first thing Adam saw was the empty eye sockets of the Havok Staff’s ram’s head. The image then panned back, revealing the staff to be placed upon a hook, hanging upright from a wall. As the vision drifted further from the staff, it revealed a rudimentary shack made of bark and leaves. It continued out until they saw an entire village

of such shacks and smaller huts, surrounded by cold, snowy mountains. The image faded. “Did that mean anything to you?” she asked.

“It looked like one of the villages of the North,” he answered. “I don’t know which, though. I’ve not spent much time that far into the mountains.”

She shook her head. “Neither have I, but I recognized a crest within that dwelling. It represents the Dytherians, warriors of the North who have little contact with the outside world.”

“How could they have gotten the Havok Staff?” he asked.

“I couldn’t tell you,” she answered. “But it looks like we’re going to need some warmer clothes.”

9.

STRANGE ALLIANCES

Despara marched boldly toward Hordak's quarters, despite the fear that sent chills through her body. Not only had she escaped that dying galaxy by the skin of her teeth, but the entire ordeal had left her a bit shaken. How could she have just appeared there so suddenly? What kind of device could Hordak have wired into that stealth fighter that would allow it to accomplish such an impossible feat? Either one of those things would have been enough to terrify a normal soldier, but they were not the cause of the Force Captain's fear. No, she was afraid of what Hordak would do to her when he learned that she had failed. She had found the ancient carving that her father sought, but it had crumbled into dust in Elesian's death throes. She had nothing to give him but a recording, a useless tone that would earn her nothing but a harsh punishment at his hands, the likes of which she had not suffered for nearly a decade.

Despara took a deep breath as she reached for the door's alert chime to let her father know that she had returned. Before she could reach it, the door opened of its own accord. He already knew she was there. "Enter." His deep voice reverberated throughout the hall and she did as he commanded. Upon making her way into Hordak's quarters, she saw him seated on a smaller version of the throne that he remained in most of his days while doling out orders and

proclamations to the worlds under his control. The ancient sorcerer sat still, his hands resting upon the arms of the large chair. He gazed into her eyes, hidden behind her mask's red lenses, but said nothing.

After a long moment, she found the courage to speak. "I found what you sought, Father."

"Did you?" he asked. "Where is it?"

She swallowed hard. "Unfortunately, it was destroyed moments before the planet met its own end."

"You speak of the wall?" he asked calmly, giving nothing away with his stony expression.

She felt a bead of sweat run down the small of her back despite her suit's temperature controls. "Yes, and the Horde ship carved upon it. It crumbled to dust."

"Hmmm." He sounded almost bemused and she was surprised that he remained at ease despite the obvious loss of the item he had sent her to retrieve. "I sense that you have something to give me, regardless," he said at last.

Reaching to her belt, she pulled out the recording device and handed it to him. "I'm afraid it's useless. Just some kind of tone the wall was emitting."

Hordak pressed a button on the device and it played the sound she had recorded minutes before Elesian's destruction. Despara was shocked to see the Horde ruler smile upon hearing it. "You've done well, my daughter."

"I have?" she asked, feeling a bit foolish.

He nodded. "This tone is what you were sent to retrieve. The wall itself was of little consequence, but with it gone, this note would have been lost."

She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion, her mask emulating her expression. "A simple tone? That's what I was after? How could something as insignificant as this be worth the danger to retrieve it?"

"You were in no danger," Hordak stated matter-of-factly. "I knew you would return. As for the tone, do you not remember your lessons as a youth? Nothing is insignificant, my child, nothing at all. This tone, this 'simple' musical note, is vastly more important than you realize." He stood and walked toward the hidden compartment in the wall of his quarters and placed the recording device within it.

“Why? What is it?” she asked, her interest piqued.

He turned his head back toward her, but continued facing the wall. “You will learn in due time.”

“The Horde ship in the carving,” she began, treading carefully, “I take it The Horde has been there before?”

“Indeed,” he answered. “It was in fact birthed there, more than a thousand years ago, as I was.”

“As you were?” she said curiously. “Elesian was your home world?” she asked, the shock audible in her voice.

“Yes,” he answered. “My race left it many centuries ago, but that is where it originated.”

She felt her eyes widen with the revelation. “And yet you feel nothing upon hearing the news of its destruction?” she asked.

Hordak’s voice remained emotionless as he spoke. “Does a dragon feel sadness for the egg that cracked while hatching it?”

“No, I suppose not,” she answered.

“Then I do not,” he said simply. There was a long pause as she waited for him to say more. Instead, he merely turned back to the compartment, engrossed in his newly acquired item. “That will be all.”

Despara bowed and quietly left the room, shocked, to say the least that her meeting with Hordak had gone as it had. *A musical tone? How ludicrous,* she thought. *But what does it mean?*

■ ■ ■

Skeletor sat calmly within the bright light of his cell. It had been some time since the Horde Force Captain who called herself ‘Despara,’ had paid him a visit. She was afraid of him now. He had made sure of that during their last encounter. Despite this, he had to admit he was a bit surprised by her absence as of late. He had expected her to have Randor’s stubbornness. His brother’s blood flowed

through the girl's veins after all, even if she didn't know it. Gazing downward at the floor, lost in thought, the skull-faced sorcerer almost didn't hear the sound of his cell door opening. He glanced upward, expecting to see the Force Captain standing in the doorway as he had predicted, but was surprised to instead see a new face. Well, almost new. This woman had been in the room upon his and Randor's arrival from Despondos, but that was the last time he'd seen her.

She stood tall, nearly as tall as he did, and appeared to be human, although he suspected that her origins weren't that simple. She wore a short red dress emblazoned with the Horde sigil. Complementing it were high red boots that nearly reached her knees and red metal bracers that covered her tautly muscled forearms. To top it off, a purple cape with a high red collar hung from her shoulders and a tiara of sorts, also red, rested upon her forehead. Skeletor reasoned that it doubled as some kind of mask, as it bore its own set of eyes. The woman had black hair which, even pulled back into the tight ponytail that sat high upon her head, was extremely long, hanging well past her slim waist. Her green eyes and the sharp, angular features of her face made her a very beautiful woman, a rarity amongst the members of The Horde, to be sure. Skeletor sat silently, waiting for her to speak. It took a long moment, as she seemed to be taking in the sight of him as much as he was her.

She appeared to be studying him, perhaps sizing him up and gauging whether or not he was a threat. "Greetings," she finally said, her voice escaping her throat in a seductive purr. "I am Catra." He said nothing in response. This woman appeared to be intelligent and cunning and Skeletor didn't want to give her any advantages during the course of this initial meeting. "The silent type, I see?" she asked with a wicked smile. "No matter. I know who you are."

"And who am I?" he asked.

"You are Skeletor, Lord of Destruction," she answered. "Former apprentice to Lord Hordak himself, and once his favorite pupil until you betrayed him."

"He betrayed me, actually."

She clicked her tongue, amused. "That's not what I heard. You questioned his judgment, which is akin to betrayal within the ranks of The Horde."

"Only if you are a fool," he said.

She smiled once more. "Good thing I'm not, then. You and I have something in common, Skeletor. We both want things we can't have. You crave

power and want to escape. I crave power as well, and want Despara gone.”

“You’re aiming a bit low,” he said. “Why not just go for Hordak?”

“You know that that would be suicide. You’re just baiting me. Besides, it’s only a start,” she replied. “I should be Force Captain. Everyone knows this, yet he gave the title to his own daughter. She didn’t earn it or fight for it like I have. It was simply given to her, like a pony would be given to a spoiled brat on her eleventh birthday.”

Skeletor sighed, shaking his head. “I’m tiring of this. I assume you have a point?”

She nodded, closing the distance between them as she did so. “I want to make a deal with you. I want Despara gone. You want out of here. How can we align our goals; make them work together?” He stood and she approached him, gently tracing her fingertips across his bare stomach. “I could make it worth your while.”

He brushed her hand away. “Not interested.”

“In a deal?” she paused. “Or me?”

“You.”

She hissed as she took a step back. “No man has ever denied me!”

“I am no mere man, as you should plainly see,” he said, his empty eye sockets blazing red. “I am also not a fool. Those types of entanglements have brought me nothing but trouble.” An image of Evil-Lyn briefly flashed in his mind, but he quickly cast it aside, returning his focus to the matter at hand. “Women of your type are nothing strange or unusual, Catra. Tell me if I’m correct. I sense that you feel as if the universe owes you. This would indicate that you were born of privilege; royalty, perhaps. Beyond that, I assume that you must be accustomed to getting your own way with the aid of your beauty alone. A high-ranking member of The Horde, your looks have certainly helped play a role in your rise to the top. There will come a point, however, when they will get you no further. Hordak will never be swayed by them. He has no interest in that sort of thing. If you are as intelligent as I take you to be, then you know this as well, and this display with me is simply an attempt to build a useful alliance in its stead.” He paused, enjoying the look of shock on her face. “I don’t look down on you for this. In fact, I admire you for using everything at your disposal to acquire the power you desire. Regardless, your attempt to sway me with this particular tool is misguided, at best.”

Catra gritted her teeth in anger, before calming down. “For someone with no eyes, you see much. What about Despara, then?”

“How do I know you won’t betray my trust?” he asked.

“You don’t,” she answered, “but rest assured that I want as little competition around here as possible, and despite your falling out with Lord Hordak, I consider you to be competition, as well. It’s in my best interest to get you back to wherever it is you came here from.”

“Fine,” he said. “Then we have an agreement.”

She smiled again. “Good, good. I know you’ve spent a large amount of time with Despara. That she talks to you. Tell me, what is her weakness?”

It didn’t take him long to answer. “Self-doubt.”

Catra pursed her lips. “Really? Interesting and I admit a bit unexpected.” She bit her lip lightly as she thought. “But how can I exploit that?”

“The other man that was brought here with me, last I’d heard, he was still alive,” Skeletor said. “Is that still true?”

“What does that have to do with—?”

“Just answer the question,” he interrupted.

“Yes, yes, he’s alive. In fact, he’s not far from here.”

“Good. Make sure that she visits him.”

Catra raised her eyebrows curiously, not really seeing where he was going with this. “How? According to the logs, she’s never been to his cell, only yours.”

Skeletor nodded. “Yes, many times. In fact, I expect to see her again soon.” He paused in thought. “It’s simple then. Arrange to have our cells switched. The next time she thinks she’s coming to see me—”

“She’ll find him instead,” she finished, at first seeming impressed with the idea before a confused expression crossed her face. “What in the worlds does that gain?”

The blue-skinned sorcerer crossed his arms across his muscular chest. “If you want Despara gone, then you need to accept that your place is not to question me, it’s to do as I say. I know more about her than you could ever learn. Just make sure she visits the other prisoner.”

“You’re sure that this will work?” Catra asked.

“It will only plant a seed,” he answered, “but I’ll make sure that it grows. When it’s all over, Despara will want to leave of her own accord.”

“And when she is gone and I’m Force Captain, I’ll see to your release?” She raised her left brow, bemused.

“No.” He shook his head. “Hordak would never allow it. What you will do is find a way to trick him into undoing the spell that prevents magic use within the Fright Zone. After you do that, my power will be restored and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” she asked, her face showing her confusion.

“That part is your problem to solve,” he said simply.

She nodded. “Fair enough, I suppose.” She held out her hand for him to shake. As he did, the cold feel of his skin gave her a slight chill. Skeletor could see in her eyes that she desired him, perhaps genuinely this time. She had never been rejected before. He would wager that she probably saw it as a challenge to her pride that he had denied her advances, regardless of whether or not she found him attractive, which was as unlikely as the sun setting in the morning. He mused over the fact that he often tended to get women entangled in his plans. Sometimes they were useful to him, but more often than not it led to complications. He hoped that in this instance it would work out in his favor for once.



Randor found himself standing in a field and knew instantly that he was dreaming. Despite the realization, he wished it were real, for his eyes beheld a face he’d longed to see again for many years. The woman stood before him in a flowing gown, beautiful and ornate. Her lips curved upward in a smile before the sun rose above the rolling hills behind her, the sudden brightness causing him to close his eyes. When he reopened them, he felt the familiar feeling of the hard cot below him, causing his back to ache.

The former king shielded his eyes as a rush of light entered his cell from the opening door. The darkness they were keeping him in was not complete. Hordak did not want him going blind. The Horde leader knew that the sight of Adora had tortured the former Eternian king. Randor felt assured that the foul creature surely wanted to be able to cause that same pain once again when it would suit him. Despite this, his keepers kept it dark enough in his cell that his eyes took a moment to adjust as it was flooded with light from the hall. He felt armored hands grab him from underneath his shoulders and lift him up to his feet. Once his eyes had adjusted to the light, Randor saw a woman standing before him. He'd seen her before, but not since he'd first arrived. She had bright green eyes, long black hair, and was dressed in red. "You're coming with me," she told him. Her voice carried an air of authority and Randor was sure that she must be a high-ranking member of The Horde. The two Horde troopers that had gripped his arms led him forcefully into the hallway.

"Where are we going?" he asked to no reply. The guards were practically dragging him through the hall. He was raised up high enough that his feet barely touched the floor, his toes gliding across it. He saw shadows moving at the end of the hall, and another group of guards, larger than his own, turned a corner and headed in his direction. Standing at the center of eight guards was Skeletor, still alive. Had he been given back his rank within The Horde? Was he the one that Randor was being dragged out to see? Randor's guards moved to the right of the hallway to allow Skeletor and his group to move past them. Randor eyed his old enemy and saw that the skull-faced sorcerer was shackled, still a prisoner. The Eternian couldn't help but smile as Skeletor passed by. The sorcerer merely glanced up at him and returned it, lowering his bone jaw slightly in what Randor had come to know as a grin. What was he smiling about? Skeletor always had a plan and Randor wondered what he was up to. A sick feeling grew deep within his stomach as he contemplated the possibilities.

He lost sight of Skeletor as the guards at his side pulled Randor back into the hallway, moving once again in the direction they had been headed in before Skeletor had been brought by. Not long after, they approached another cell, nearly identical to the one Randor had spent countless days in, and he was violently thrown inside. He quickly turned only to see the woman with green eyes smile evilly as the door shut, plunging him into near-darkness once again. What had been the point of moving him? What was going on?

10.

A COLD RECEPTION

Adam used his right hand to pull his cloak tighter against his body as his Sky Sled sped along the cold base of the mountains. He and Evelyn had stopped at a village an hour earlier and picked up some warmer clothes in preparation for the next phase of their journey. She had even purchased a blanket made of large pelts to place underneath Panthor's saddle in an attempt to keep the giant cat warm. Although dylinx cats came from the mountains, Panthor had been primarily raised in a hot climate and was none too happy to be this far north.

The Eternian king slowed his vehicle as the woman stopped slightly ahead of him. Glancing toward his unlikely companions as Evelyn rubbed her pet behind the ears, Adam pondered the bizarre situation he found himself in currently. Evelyn had changed, that much he was sure of, but he couldn't help but remember her as Evil-Lyn and all of the treacherous things she'd done in her lifetime. When it came down to it, she was even partly responsible for the theft of Adam's twin sister when they were infants, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. He wondered silently whether or not the older woman could be trusted. She had been known to turn on her allies in the past. Evelyn had enhanced his Power Sword with the Stone of Protection, true, but in his experience she never

did anything unless it somehow played out in her favor. She claimed that she owed Adam for her role in his father's disappearance and, more than that, owed Randor for his role in ridding Tellus of Skeletor. Due to her former master being swept into Despondos, he could not harm her for betraying him. She was now out of Skeletor's reach. Despite this, Adam couldn't help but feel that she had to have an ulterior motive for helping him. The Sorceress of Zalesia turned and looked in his direction and he smiled in an awkward attempt to hide his negative thoughts.

"According to a villager I spoke to, the road ahead of us leads to the Dytherian village we saw in the vision," Evelyn called back to him, the cold wind making her voice sound far away. "I've never been there, so I don't quite know what to expect."

"We'll have to be careful," he responded.

"That goes without saying," she answered. "If we get into trouble, just follow my lead. I want to liberate that staff."

"No killing," Adam said, in as commanding a voice as he could manage.

Her expression hardened. "You are not my king, Adam. Don't presume to command me. That being said, who said anything about killing? I just want to get that staff and get out of this frozen hell. Don't forget that I live in a desert. I'm not exactly enjoying this." She patted Panthor on his right flank and they were off again, Adam in pursuit.

Riding in silence on the mountain pass, Adam noticed that the ground was beginning to become more and more frosted over as they ascended. It wasn't long before the frost gave way to light snow. The winds were also getting colder and he began to wish that he'd bought a heavier cloak from that merchant. After nearly two hours, they approached the crest of the mountain and saw a large wooden gate, closed tight, that stretched across the road. At each side of the gate was a female guard, wearing far less clothing than either Adam or Evelyn. A lifetime in the mountains had helped them acclimate to the cold. Still, they both wore pelted cloaks that wrapped most of the way around them. Carrying a spear apiece, they crossed them anxiously as Adam and his companions approached, surprised to see strangers so near their home. "Who goes there?" the guard on the left called out, her voice carrying a slight accent to Adam's ears.

"I am Adam of Eternia and these are my companions Evelyn and her mount, Panthor," he answered. "We come in peace."

“No one comes to our tribe in peace, Outsider,” the guard on the right replied.

“I assure you that we are different,” Adam reasoned. “We are not your enemies. We simply wish to speak with your leaders.”

“About what?” the left guard asked.

“It’s a private matter,” Evelyn answered, speaking up for the first time, “but he is telling the truth. We mean you no harm.”

The two women discussed the situation between themselves, out of earshot. After a minute, they seemed to have reached an agreement. “I will tell our chieftess that you are here,” the one on the left spoke once more. “She will decide whether or not she will grant you an audience. You will both dismount and stay where you are.”

“Fair enough,” Adam replied as he hopped down from his Sky Sled. Evelyn frowned, but followed suit, climbing down from Panthor’s saddle, comforting the giant cat by gently rubbing the back of his neck as she did so. The Dytherian woman turned and the gate opened just enough to allow her to pass through it. The remaining guard looked upon the two of them and their giant cat nervously as they all waited for the other to return.

After what felt like an eternity of awkward silence, but was in reality only minutes, the gate opened once again and the guard that had left earlier returned. Instead of speaking to them, she merely returned to her post, crossing spears once again with her comrade. Evelyn looked toward Adam. “I take it that’s a ‘no’?”

“I’m not sure,” Adam answered, feeling uneasy. A shadow fell on them from above and he glanced up to see the backlit silhouette of a woman with a large headdress made from animal pelts. Antlers rose from her brow, attached to a crown of bone.

“You claim to be Adam of Eternia,” the woman’s voice called.

“I am,” he answered.

“You are their king, are you not?” she asked. “You fit his description.”

“I am,” he repeated.

“Then why not announce yourself as such? What have you to hide?” she challenged.

“I am not here as a king,” he answered. “I am on a mission of great personal importance, but it is not related to my kingdom. I travel here merely as a man.”

There was a pause before the woman spoke again. “Then, as a mere man, you may enter my village. Don’t mistakenly think that your royal blood means anything here.”

“I understand,” he answered once more. “I only wish to speak with you.”

“Then enter.”

With those words, the two guards stepped aside and the gate spread wide. Adam left his Sky Sled behind with Panthor as he and Evelyn made their way past the guards and into the isolated Dytherian village. As they walked, Adam noticed that while the village was not comprised entirely of women, they were definitely the majority. Each of them seemed to be engaged in some type of task. Whether it was sharpening blades, forging new ones or fitting shoes onto their horses, they were all busy. It didn’t stop them from eyeing the strangers that walked amongst them, however and Adam couldn’t help but feel a bit uneasy.

What was even more curious to him was that the women seemed to be the ones engaged in the labor while the men of the village were tending to the children and huts. A role-reversal from what he was used to, but Adam knew that many cultures operated differently from his own and he had to admit that he found the whole situation somewhat refreshing. He’d always believed in the strength of women and a place where they appeared to be the heads of the household was welcome to him. It also explained why their mysterious leader was more willing to let him in once he’d acknowledged that he wasn’t here on official kingly business. He understood that this tribe did not recognize male leadership and his title wouldn’t have meant much anyway, but knowing that he was not about to lord it over them seemed to have worked in his and Evelyn’s favor, at least so far.

They followed the woman in the headdress to the very same hut that they had seen in the vision. Adam tried hard not to stare at the Havok Staff hanging on the wall as the woman sat on the floor. He and Evelyn followed suit, settling down on what was a surprisingly comfortable mat, for what it was, made from the pelt of a thick-furred animal. Something native to these mountains, he assumed. Sitting across from the tribe’s leader, he got his first good look at her when she removed her headdress, resting it beside her. Adam guessed that she was probably around the same age as his father. Her red hair had grayed slightly, but

retained much of its color. She wore a gray cloak that hung over her shoulders. Underneath she wore little else, but like the other inhabitants of the Dytherian village, what she wore appeared to be enough to keep her warm. A fire in the middle of the hut, its smoke escaping through a hole in the center of the roof, helped the cause as well and Adam was thankful for it, as his cloak wasn't doing as good of a job keeping him warm as he would have liked. Temporarily lost in thought, he was startled when the woman spoke once more.

"I know you are Adam of Eternia, son of Randor." Her eyes drifted toward Evelyn. "And I know who you are as well. You would not be welcome here, Witch, if not for the Eternian. His reputation precedes him and if he is comfortable having you at his side, then I will trust his judgment, but be warned: if you do anything that I find even the slightest bit suspicious, I'll cleave you in two, myself."

Evelyn turned to him and gave him a crooked smile. "Well, she seems welcoming enough, don't you think?"

He couldn't help but grin slightly himself before addressing the matter to the woman before them. "You're right. Evelyn is with me. She no longer serves our enemies."

The chieftess gave him a solemn look. "From what I understand of her history, she's never truly served anyone, save for herself. I wouldn't let my guard down too much, Eternian."

"Fair enough," Evelyn interjected, "but since we're being fair, and you seem to know plenty about us, it's only right that you tell us who you are."

The woman nodded. "I am the chieftess of the Dytherian people, a role earned in battle, as is our way. My name is Kira 'Na." Both Adam and Evelyn were shaken by the name. Kira 'Na was a woman from a story of Keldor's youth that he'd once told Evelyn, who'd then recorded it in her journal, where Adam would read it many years later. The red-headed woman had been a slave with Adam's uncle during his first exile, when the half-Gar sorcerer had been a young man. According to the story, Keldor had aided Kira 'Na in her escape. Could this really be the same woman? "Why do you both appear so startled?" she asked.

"Did you ever know a young warrior named 'Keldor'?" Adam asked the woman.

"Yes, your uncle," she answered matter-of-factly. "Since you and your father before you were king, I know that Keldor never realized his goal of

reclaiming his throne.”

Adam was struck silent a moment before answering. “No. No, he didn’t. In fact, I’ve never even met my uncle. He was lost to us.” Evelyn shot him a look, but it quickly faded. She had to understand that Adam wouldn’t want others to know of his familial link to the dark sorcerer known as Skeletor.

“That’s too bad,” Kira ‘Na replied. “He was a good man. A bit brash, perhaps, but good, though I understand that your father made for a good king, so maybe it was for the best in the end. That is for the fates to decide, not mortals like us.” Adam simply nodded, not sure of what to say. “So tell me,” she continued, “what brings you to my village? Why are you here?”

Adam explained to her how his father had been lost to Despondos, that he’d been freed from that prison only to be put into one even fouler, on a planet called Etheria, which resided in another dimension. He told her it was his mission to rescue his father from that place and that he needed a key to get there. “So you see,” he concluded, “I can’t get there without the Havok Staff, and it’s hanging right there behind you.”

Kira ‘Na did not turn to look at it. “Several of my people died during their journey to Snake Mountain. They were luring the Shadow Beasts inside in an attempt to protect the farms in the area. We get much of our food sent to us from those farms. We rely on trade as the ground here is not very fertile, but it is where my people have lived for generations. Their finding the staff was an accident, but I do not believe in coincidences. Their locating it and bringing it here to the village was providence.”

“But if you don’t believe in coincidences,” Adam continued, “surely you can’t ignore the one that is before you right now: that the nephew of the man who saved your life would come to you, searching for that very staff.”

“You’re right. I do think that it is strange, and perhaps this moment was always destined to be. It is her presence that gives me pause,” Kira ‘Na said, indicating Evelyn with a wave of her hand. “If you were alone, it would be one thing, but I cannot allow you to take the staff while you have this malefactress travelling with you.”

The Sorceress of Zalesia’s eyes blazed with anger, but Adam gently placed his hand on her shoulder, urging her to remain calm. “You don’t understand. Evelyn was instrumental in our ridding Tellus of Skeletor. Without her help, I feel the battle between that skull-faced sorcerer and my kingdom would have raged on for yet another ten years.”

Kira 'Na turned toward Evelyn. "Is this true?"

Evelyn sighed. "From a certain point of view, yes. Skeletor would still be here if I hadn't betrayed him."

"Then perhaps I have misjudged you, after all," Kira 'Na replied. "You'll have to forgive me. This high in the mountains, we do not often hear the news of our neighbors. If you are now an ally to the Eternians, that information has simply not reached us yet."

"I wouldn't say that I am an ally," Evelyn admitted, "but we are no longer enemies."

"Even still, that is good to hear," the woman replied. "If a soul such as yours can be redeemed then there is hope for us all."

Evelyn forced a smile at the backhanded compliment. "Indeed," she said, almost under her breath.

Turning back to Adam, Kira 'Na paused a moment before she continued. "Unfortunately, Adam, I cannot give you the Havok Staff. You stand to benefit from taking it, but what would my people receive in return? We are traders, after all."

"Eternia can give you aid," he replied, "help you defend your land. I am told that the Gar continue to trouble you."

"I doubt Eternia can be of much help to us up here."

Adam grimaced as he thought. There had to be something that he could offer her. From what he'd read of her, Kira 'Na was once a warrior and she'd fought side-by-side with Keldor during their escape. Perhaps his old enemy would be of some use to him. "Am I correct in thinking that you owe Keldor your life?" he asked.

"Yes, but what has that to do with this?" she asked.

"Keldor is imprisoned on Etheria as well, and has been for some time. If I'm able to use the staff to get there, I can free him, along with my father, and your debt to him can be considered fulfilled." Evelyn's eyes widened with shock upon hearing his words, but she remained silent.

"You speak of a life-debt, Eternian, but I feel you know little about them," she responded, before pausing in thought. "Still, there have often been nights where I've felt ashamed at having left Keldor and Kronis to fend for themselves

against Arkonus. I was young. Back then, I believed in living to fight another day, but without Keldor's help, who knows what would have happened to me?" She thought it over, her eyes focused on something in the far distance, lost in memory. After a long moment, she stood and walked to where the Havok Staff hung on the wall of the hut. She pulled it down and handed it to Adam. He reached out for it, but she did not release her grip on the Zalesian artifact. "There is one condition to my giving you this, Eternian."

"And what is that?" he asked.

"That I will go with you and free Keldor from his imprisonment," she answered. "You freeing him with the staff might alleviate my shame at having left him all those years ago, but it wouldn't fulfill my debt. In order to achieve that, I must be the one to do it. More than that, my people are in the middle of a cold war with the Gar, an alien race that settled not far from here, generations ago. The tensions between our people are palpable. I have often thought that Keldor would have been of use to me in this matter, that perhaps together we could help our races move forward. If I can free him, it is possible that he can help me bring peace to our people. I have exhausted all other options. This opportunity to free Keldor cannot be of coincidence, either, Adam of Eternia. I must go with you."

Adam sighed. He didn't like coloring the truth in order to get her help, let alone allow her to think that Keldor could or would even be willing to help her people. Even on his best days, Keldor cared little for the affairs of others. Now that he was Skeletor, he didn't care at all. Unfortunately, Adam knew that he was now trapped by his lie, and had no choice but to continue his charade. "Agreed."

"Good," she said, letting go of the staff. It felt cold in his hands, and he immediately sensed the power that surged within the ancient weapon. He glanced toward Evelyn, but was unable to look her in the eye.



Their descent to the base of the mountain was filled with Kira 'Na speaking to them about her adventure with Keldor in the slave pits of Arkonus. It was not new information to either Adam or Evelyn, but it was interesting to hear the same story from another's perspective. Kira Na' rode bareback on a massive horse, the animal surprisingly docile despite being in the presence of Panthor.

Evelyn hadn't spoken a word the entire trip and whenever Adam looked in her direction her eyes would shoot daggers at him. Once they reached the village where Adam and Evelyn had purchased their pelts, Kira 'Na left them in order to buy some supplies of her own. Adam hopped off of his Sky Sled. As he did so, Evelyn dismounted Panthor and made a beeline for him, sticking her finger forcefully into his chest. "You lied to her," she seethed.

"I didn't lie, I just," he paused, "didn't tell her the whole truth."

"And that makes it alright, does it?" she asked. "She thinks she's off to save an old ally, and you know as well as I do that that man is dead."

"But he's not really dead," Adam reasoned, "he's—"

"He's dead," Evelyn hissed, "and Kira 'Na will be too, once she arrives on Etheria with you. You'll both be killed due to your stupidity."

"But we'll have your magic," he said, quietly.

"Not now, you won't," she replied angrily. "I might have considered going with you before you took the easy way out back there. I'm more than experienced at lying to get what I need, but I wouldn't have thought you'd be one to do it so skillfully. You take after your uncle more than you realize." She walked away from him and mounted Panthor once more. Glancing back, she leveled him with a heavy gaze. "Remember what I said. Do you really want to be like him?" He could do nothing but stare blankly, speechless. She sighed in response. "If you somehow manage to succeed, I still expect to get the Havok Staff back. I don't want it going back to Kira 'Na's tribe. Don't forget that that was part of our deal. Good luck, Adam. Where you're going, you'll need it." Without another word, she rode off into the surrounding hills. Adam stared after her until he lost sight of the woman altogether. She was right. He'd already had to compromise his convictions once on this journey. Would he have to continue to do so in order to succeed?

11.

THE TRUTH REVEALED?

A sequence of musical tones played in the back of Hordak's mind as he stared at the star map. He gazed at its patterns of stars and planets, repeating the notes over and over again silently as he tried to solve the map's puzzle; the oldest puzzle of all. He traced his finger from one spell-made glyph to the next, charting a course through the heavens that would lead him to his goal. There he would have his ultimate victory, at his journey's end. With this most recent discovery, brought to him by his daughter, it was no longer a question of where, but when. Soon, his centuries-old plan would come to fruition. Soon, all of his enemies' moves against him, even the past triumphs of foes such as King Grayskull, would all be for naught. Nothing would stop him. It wouldn't be long now. Not long at all.

■ ■ ■

Despara gritted her teeth as she approached Skeletor's cell. She'd be lying if she said that her last visit with the sorcerer hadn't rattled her. He'd seemed so weak and docile in her previous encounters with him that she hadn't expected the man to attack her as he had. She'd been a fool and had let her guard down. It was up to her to rectify that situation and she would do it now. Despara had to show Skeletor that she was in charge, not him. She had to show him that she wasn't afraid. Punching the button that opened the cell, she strode in boldly before the door had finished opening. The Force Captain was surprised to find the room engulfed in near darkness but her mask quickly switched to infrared vision and she saw the outline of Skeletor's form, a swirl of color amidst the blackness of the cell.

She approached him quickly, thrusting the heel of her boot violently into his stomach. She heard him grunt as he slumped against the floor. She reached down and grabbed him, hoisting him up to his feet once more and slamming the skull-faced man hard into the wall behind him. Despara heard him let out a breath before he spoke. "If you're going to start this, you had better finish it." She let go of the man quickly when she realized that the voice coming from the thermo-image wasn't Skeletor's.

"Lights!" she barked into the dark of the cell.

"*Voice match confirmed,*" she heard the automated system say. "*Welcome, Force Captain Despara.*"

As the lights of the cell suddenly illuminated it, her mask switched back to standard vision. The bearded Eternian man from her dreams stood before her, holding his gut with a grimace on his face. "What in the blazes are you doing here?" she demanded.

He glanced up at her with an expression that she couldn't identify. "I don't have any idea. I was just moved to this cell this morning."

"Who moved you?"

"I don't know that, either," he answered. "I'd only seen her once before."

"What did she look like?"

"Why should I tell you?" he asked, his voice raising.

She looked him deep in the eye. "Because I should have killed you when you first arrived, but stayed my hand."

He sighed, remembering the look on her true face when he'd told her she

had 'her mother's eyes.' It seemed like a lifetime ago. Gazing into Despara's horrific mask, Randor focused intently on remembering that face, as he so often had during his imprisonment here. He fought hard daily to recall every curve; every line that gave it its shape; the contours that made it the face of his daughter, not this monster before him now. It felt like trying to remember a face seen in a dream. "I suppose that's true." After a moment's hesitation, he continued. "The woman had green eyes and black hair. She wore red. That's all I know."

"Catra," Despara said, seething. "I should have known. She obviously switched you and Skeletor for a reason. Why would she want me to see you?"

"I don't know," he said. "You haven't been here to see me since we first encountered each other. Maybe she thinks you're afraid."

"And what would I have to be afraid of?" she asked.

"I think you know," Randor replied. "You're afraid that I'm right. You're afraid of the truth: that I know more about you than you do."

"You know nothing about me, old man." She turned to leave, the cell door closing quickly behind her. Despara stormed down the hall toward where the Eternian had been, figuring that that was where Skeletor was now located. As the cell door opened, she saw that she was right. She pulled her mask over her head and threw it to the floor of the cell as the door closed behind her. Skeletor looked at her and lowered his jaw slightly in that sickly grin of his. "You knew about this, didn't you?" she demanded.

"Of course, my dear," he said calmly. "It was my idea."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why? What purpose does it serve?"

"I told you before, Force Captain," he said. "My purpose."

"Fine. Then what is your purpose?" she asked.

He chuckled in response. "Simply to reunite a father with his daughter."

"That man is not my father." As she spoke, she fought hard to keep her composure. Despite her best efforts, she still feared this man, a feeling that lingered since their last encounter, no matter how hard she tried to shake it.

"And who do you think is?" Skeletor asked. "Hordak? He's not even human."

Her eyes narrowed. “He raised me. Whether I share his blood or not is irrelevant. He is my father.”

Skeletor shrugged nonchalantly. “There is some truth to that, but you can’t deny that there is something about Randor that triggers an emotional response within you. Is it doubt? Love? Judging by the fact that he’s still alive, I’d say it certainly involves mercy.”

“I kept him alive for my own reasons,” she answered quickly.

“And what reasons would those be? You’ve not seen him even once before tonight. Catra reviewed the logs.”

“Catra seeks my position,” she answered. “She has plenty of reason to lie to you.”

Skeletor scoffed. “Anyone can see that Catra desires power. I’m not a fool, but I also know she’s not lying.”

“How, then?” Despara demanded. “How do you know I’ve not seen him?”

The sorcerer leaned forward. “I can see it in your eyes.”

“See what?”

“Fear.” When the word was met with silence, Skeletor let it hang in the air a moment before continuing. “You wanted to know who he was, remember? You even tried to beat it out of me.”

“Yes, I remember,” she answered.

“He’s right, you know. You do have your mother’s pretty blue eyes,” he said with a soft, hollow laugh. She avoided his gaze, albeit only briefly. She was trying hard to appear unafraid. “Well do you still want to know the truth of your origins?” he asked. “I’m willing to talk tonight. I’ve missed you,” he laughed mockingly.

She fidgeted and began to make her way back to the door before turning back around suddenly. “Fine. Tell me everything you know.”

■ ■ ■

Despara paced her sparsely-decorated quarters until she felt lightheaded and had to sit down. She collapsed onto a chair that sat in the rear corner and pressed her fingers into her temples, hoping the pressure would alleviate her sudden nausea. Skeletor had told her much, but she knew he'd withheld details from her. According to the dark sorcerer, she was not from this world. He'd told her that Randor was indeed her birth father and that, more than that, she was a princess. She found the entire idea preposterous, but it somehow felt right. Still, if true, there were two major pieces of information that Skeletor had refused to disclose: the name of her home planet and, even more important, her own. If Skeletor had not been lying then it was obvious that 'Despara' was a name given to her by her adoptive father. What her birth name was, she had no idea.

The only way to find out more would be to talk to Randor. She wanted, no, she needed to find out more. She couldn't explain why. She had been happy with her place in life for it was a place of privilege. Regardless, she just had to know. The problem with speaking to Randor was that that was exactly what Skeletor wanted her to do. She didn't understand the sorcerer's motives in the matter, but with Skeletor's reputation for lies and deception, she knew he was up to something. He'd so much as admitted it. But what could it be? What would he stand to gain from telling her the truth? Breaking her?

If so, she felt as if he'd already succeeded.



They sky was blue and she felt its cool breeze on her face as she peered out from the balcony. Despara possessed an awareness this time that she usually did not have when the dream came. She turned, expecting to see the blond man with the crown and sword, but instead saw no one. "Adora." The word came from the room beyond as a whisper, barely audible to her ears, but unmistakably female. She strained to hear the voice again, but heard nothing. Carefully, she stepped into the room. It was a royal palace, she realized. In fact, it was her home. How she knew this, she did not understand, but somehow she knew. "Adora," the voice said again, slightly louder than before. She followed the sound, trying to locate its source.

"Hello?" she called out. No one answered. "Is anyone there?" Again, nothing.

After a long moment, it came again, this time from the hall outside of the room where she stood. "Adora."

She walked cautiously to the doorway. Looking around the room, she saw that she was in a bedroom of some kind. Was it hers? Reaching the door, she opened it to a bright light that nearly blinded her. She raised her right hand in an effort to shield her eyes. Within the bright shining light, she saw the outline of a woman, but she couldn't make out her features. Then the whisper came once again, this time so close to her left ear that it made her jump, "Adora."

Despara bolted upright from a slouching position. She found herself located upon the same chair she had been on before. She didn't recall falling asleep, but knew that it must have happened shortly after she'd returned from her conversation with Skeletor. She had been running herself to exhaustion lately and after her trip to Elesian, her body had simply had enough. Despara had the slow realization that she'd had that familiar dream again, although this time, it had been different. This time, she felt as if it were trying to send her a message. It had been a single word. *What was it?* she thought to herself. *What was the word?* She tried to remember, but no matter how much she thought back to that ethereal dream, she couldn't recall.

She steeled herself as she rose from the chair and reached for her mask. She slipped it over her head, once more disguising her true features. As much as she wanted to forget, and as much as she wished that Skeletor and the Eternian prisoner named Randor had never arrived on Etheria, she knew that she had to speak to the man Skeletor claimed was her true father. There was no avoiding it. She had to know the truth.



Randor sat quietly within his cell, thankful that the Force Captain had left in too much of a hurry earlier that day to remember to cut off the lights. He pressed his fingers to his temples to relieve pressure, an old habit, as he thought about his situation. He was a prisoner not just of the Horde army, but of Hordak himself. It was not a good position to be in, to say the least. Hordak wanted him alive for some reason, but he had no idea why. Perhaps the Horde leader was testing Despara's loyalties. If that were the case, then Hordak must be very satisfied since, other than their brief encounter earlier, Despara had ignored

Randor entirely.

Since the day of his arrival, Randor had felt sick with emotion. As soon as he had seen the human face of the female Horde member exposed, gazed upon the bright blue eyes and light blonde hair that she shared with her brother, Randor had known that it was her: Adora, his daughter, stolen from him and his wife Marlena when she was but an infant. Skeletor and Evil-Lyn had come, along with Hordak and a battalion of Horde soldiers, and sacked Eternia. They could have taken the entire kingdom, but Hordak had instead torn out a piece of Randor's heart, a chunk of his soul, stealing away his daughter before he'd ever had a chance to know her, to see her grow, to hear her say her first words. *And now*, Randor thought, *she has been corrupted into being the antithesis of everything I believe in and stand for.*

Randor thought of his son Adam, as he often did, and wondered where he was and what he was doing. Adam had only been king for a year before Randor had been swept away into Despondos. The aging father had not had nearly as much time as he'd desired to impart his knowledge of the duties of being king to his son. He felt in his heart, however, that Adam was fine. He was a good man, in truth one of the greatest Randor had ever known, and he would be alright without his father, no matter how much he might miss him. This other child, however, Adam's twin sister, she was lost.

Randor looked up, startled by the sound of his cell door opening. He was shocked to see Despara standing in the doorway, hesitant to enter. He said nothing as he stared into her gruesome mask, emotionless and cold. After a long moment, she walked cautiously into the cell, the door closing behind her. Across from the cot on which Randor sat currently, there was a plain metal bench, bolted to the floor. Surprisingly, she sat down on it, leaning forward. He felt that she was looking at him intently, but he couldn't tell for sure due to her disguise. She sat back and seemed to be either lost in thought or concentrating very hard on what to do next. He assumed the latter. She did not seem to be the type of woman to daydream. She seemed cold and analytical, he could tell as much from her body language, and he was sure that she was analyzing him at that very moment, taking him in and studying him. Finally, he felt the need to speak, to break the silence between father and daughter that had been forced upon them, lasting a lifetime. "Why did you let me live that day?" he asked.

The question was met with a long silence and he began to wonder if she would answer it. Despara sat still, her gaze boring into him for what felt like a century before she spoke. "I don't know."

“Was Hordak upset with you?” he asked. “That you didn’t do it?”

Again, a long silence before she answered. She seemed to be having an internal debate as to whether she should speak to him or not, but the need to talk was winning out. “No. He seemed,” she paused, searching for the right word, “pleased.”

“Why do you think he was pleased?” Randor asked. “Because of your reaction?”

She shook her head. “No. Not my reaction. Yours. You have to understand. My father has lived long enough that death bores him. He doesn’t care to take the lives of the common folk who oppose him, for they mean little to him. Killing his enemies, his true enemies, this does not interest him, either. He is more satisfied in knowing that they suffer, and will continue to do so. He takes pleasure in it. Death ends suffering, so it is of little use to him.”

Randor didn’t want to ask his next question, but after several more minutes of silence, he knew she wouldn’t be initiating any type of conversation. The fact that she was speaking to him at all was strange in its suddenness after months of her ignoring him completely. “You’ve been avoiding me since that day, so why are you here? Why now?”

She sat forward once more, staring deep into his eyes. “Skeletor has shed some light on the words you said to me that day.”

In response, Randor’s eyes widened in surprise briefly, before narrowing. “Skeletor is a master manipulator and every time he speaks, it is tainted with a lie. What did he tell you?”

“I am no fool,” she replied. “I know that Skeletor is not to be trusted. He has his own reasons for telling me, though I don’t yet understand them. Regardless, I feel that what he has told me is true. I had always been told that I was an orphan from the Fright Zone’s Whelping Chambers before my father adopted me, but Skeletor claims that Lord Hordak kidnapped me as an infant and raised me as his own. He also claims that you are my birth father. I know you are from a kingdom called Eternia, but I do not know the name of your planet, nor my own. He wouldn’t share those details and I could find no reference of Eternia in our archives. Either any entries regarding the kingdom of Eternia have been erased, or Skeletor lied and it doesn’t exist. So I want to know, is what he told me true?”

“Yes,” Randor answered, to his own surprise. From what Randor knew so

far, Skeletor had actually told the girl the truth of her origins.

“Then why did Hordak take me,” she asked, “of all children on all worlds?”

“That question has plagued me since the day it happened, but I’m afraid I don’t know the answer. Perhaps it has something to do with the power located within Tellus. To answer one of your questions, that is the name of your home planet.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” she said.

“I wouldn’t expect you to have. Even if the planet itself is still in your archives, from what I understand it’s not even in this dimension,” Randor said. “You would have no reason to look for it.” He paused shortly before speaking again. “Did Skeletor tell you of your brother?”

“No,” she said simply.

“I’m not surprised, considering their history,” Randor said. “You are a twin. Your brother Adam was rejected by Hordak and your mother and I raised him lovingly. He is now king of Eternia.”

“So you were a king, as Skeletor claims?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes, our bloodline has long been tied to the Eternian throne.”

“Does my brother know of me?” Despara asked curiously.

“Of course,” he answered quickly. “We were always open about you. You were never a secret, Adora.”

His last word sent bolts of lightning down Despara’s spine. It was the word from her dream, the one the voice kept repeating. No, she realized, not just repeating; calling. The woman had been calling out to her. Calling to her by name; her true name. “Adora?” she asked. “That’s my name?”

“Yes,” Randor said, unable to keep a tear from falling. He was in a state of shock, going through the motions with this conversation, but it was slowly dawning on him that he was speaking with his daughter for the first time. *My daughter!* he thought. *Her voice sounds so much like her mother’s that it’s uncanny. A little cooler, perhaps a little tougher, but it’s unmistakable.*

“I’ve heard it before, earlier tonight, in a dream,” she replied.

“I thought no one could dream here?” he asked.

“I can,” she answered. “My dreams must be very powerful, or so Skeletor claims, to be able to break through Hordak’s spell. For me to dream of it, before ever having heard it during waking hours,” she paused, “it could mean that all of this is actually true.”

He nodded slowly. “I assure you that it is.” Silence reigned once more before Randor spoke again, pleading with her. “Now that you know, now that you know the truth,” he stumbled, searching for the right words, “would you allow me to look upon your face once more, your true face? Would you allow me to gaze upon my daughter for the first time without having her sword at my throat?”

Despara stood up and turned for the door. As it opened she turned her head back to him, but only partially, speaking to him without having to look at him. “Not yet. I’m not ready.”

“I understa—” his voice was cut off by the sound of the door closing, separating them once more. “I understand,” he said again, quietly and to himself. He’d thought Adora lost to him forever, but her coming here, her now knowing her true origins, it changed everything. Why had Skeletor told her the truth? Why had his old enemy set these events in motion? Skeletor was not altruistic. He only did something if it benefited him, but what could he possibly gain from this?

12.

IF WOODS COULD WHISPER

“I don’t understand why Evelyn left us,” Kira ‘Na remarked to Adam as they made their way into a forested area just outside of the trading village. She had released her horse to return home and Adam had likewise hidden his Sky Sled underneath some brush, which as far away from civilization as they were, he hoped would be enough to keep it safe. Kira ‘Na carried the Havok Staff. If all went according to plan, it would be their ticket to Etheria. The staff was a dimensional key that would allow them to travel to the planet where his father was being held prisoner, or so they hoped. “It was my understanding that she was very close to Keldor,” she continued. “I could see it in her eyes when I spoke of him. Why would she not want to save him?”

Adam swallowed hard, unhappy that he would have to continue his ruse with this woman that Keldor was still himself. He felt sure that Keldor was imprisoned by The Horde, along with Adam’s father Randor, but it didn’t matter for Keldor was no longer simply Keldor. He was now Skeletor, the Lord of Destruction, and had been since before Adam had been born. Keldor was long gone and Adam had no intentions of freeing his enemy from that place. Blood relation or not, the skull-faced sorcerer could rot there for all Adam cared. He only wanted his father back. Adam had made the decision to lie to Kira ‘Na

however, and he was all too aware that he couldn't back out of it now. He knew if he told her the truth this early into the mission, chances were good that she would not let him take the staff and he would never be able to save his father. He had to have the staff to get to him. Time was running out and he had no other options left. There was no going back. "She didn't say for sure, but I know that her duties as the Sorceress of Zalesia are very important. Without Castle Grayskull, Zalesia is now the primary focal point for Tellus's magic. Evelyn's responsibilities there are great."

"If you say so," she replied. "I just find it odd that she left so suddenly, and without saying goodbye."

Adam remained silent as he felt a cold chill run down his spine while they walked. He was glad that this would be over soon, one way or the other. He hated lying to someone who was being of such help to him. *Never again*, he thought.

Kira 'Na glanced at their surroundings and nodded in approval. They wanted to be discreet and the two of them were now far enough into the forest that no one would see them using the staff. She looked back at him and raised her eyebrows slightly. "Are you ready to do this? I've heard tales of The Horde and this will be no easy task."

"Trust me, I've wondered to myself whether or not I was crazy enough to do this several times on our way down the mountain. When it comes down to it, it's my father. There's no way I won't at least attempt to save him," he paused, "and my uncle," he finished awkwardly. "What about your people, though? What if we don't survive?"

Kira 'Na shrugged. "They will survive without me. The role of chieftess is earned in battle. If I don't return, they will simply hold a tournament and another will take my place. They will be fine." The warrior woman extended the staff in his direction, offering it to him. He shook his head. "I have no idea how to use it."

"It does most of the work," she said. "Just hold the staff and think about your destination. Channel all of your will into a single desire, and the staff should do the rest, at least that's what our tribal shaman told me."

"You mean you've never used it?" he asked.

"No," she answered.

"Great," he replied. "I'll have to try, but magic has never been my strong

suit.”

“Once we get there, Adam, our skill with magic will not be nearly as useful as our skill with a blade.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he replied. Taking the staff from her, he held it in front of them and closed his eyes. He concentrated as hard as he could on his father’s face, his voice, memories of him from Adam’s youth. His thoughts then drifted to the vision he and Evelyn had seen of Randor within a prison cell on the mysterious planet called Etheria. He focused on the image until he felt like he was there, making it real in his mind.

The sound of a rushing wind caused Adam to open his eyes and they immediately fixated on a mystic portal that had opened up a person’s length in front of them. The swirling lights of the vortex reminded Adam of the portal opened by this very staff that had taken his father and Skeletor into Despondos and he couldn’t help but smile, despite the painful memory. He’d done it. Kira ‘Na met his eyes with her own and nodded. Drawing her sword, she turned and jumped into the portal with no preamble, ready to face the challenge that awaited them like the warrior she was. Adam wished he felt half as confident as she seemed to be. Subconsciously checking for the weight of his own weapon, he felt the Sword of Protection upon his back and was reassured, albeit only slightly. He drew the weapon from its sheath and clutched both it and the Havok Staff tightly as he walked forward and leapt into the portal after her.

Adam was immediately struck by the feeling of being submerged in a pool of liquid energy. Before he had any more time to analyze the sensation, he felt as if he were being pulled along by a strong current. Within seconds he shot out of the other side of the portal and crash-landed within another set of woods. At first he felt as if he’d failed, that they were back where they had started. It didn’t take long to prove that notion wrong, however. Rising to a standing position, he took in the brightly colored forest in awe. It was made up of very different colors than the one they had come from, as if the gods had painted it from an entirely different palette. He turned and looked at Kira ‘Na, the same shocked look on her own face.

“I’d say it worked,” she said, seeming slightly shocked by the journey, herself.

“Yeah, I guess it did,” he replied. *Amazing*, he thought as he took in the sight of a purple tree straight ahead of them. “I was hoping I could get us directly to my father’s cell, but this has me worried. I have no idea if we’re on the right planet or not. Evelyn said that Etheria was heavily industrialized. I didn’t expect

a forest.”

“Well, we’ll just have to start walking and see what we find,” Kira ‘Na said. “It must be tricky, travelling somewhere by magic you’d never really seen with your own eyes. I believe it’s usually recommended not to do such a thing, perhaps for this very reason. I have a feeling that this is the right place, though. I’ve always had acute senses, and there’s a definite smell of machinery and oil underneath the scents of this forest.” She glanced around her, gingerly sniffing the air. She settled on one particular direction before nodding to herself. “This way, Eternian.”

He handed the Havok Staff back to her and they headed in the direction she’d indicated, aware that there surely were strange creatures on this world that they had no familiarity with. The two companions remained alert as they travelled, constantly checking their surroundings and stopping when they heard a rustle of leaves or an animal’s call. After some time, they were relieved to reach the edge of the forest without incident. Looking out from their wooded cover, they saw that they were upon an elevation, not tall enough to be a mountain, but enough that they were looking down on what Adam had expected to find in the first place: past another, darker wooded forest, they could see what appeared to be an industrialized area. Smoke rose from smokestacks with regularity and even at their current distance, the scent of machinery was noticeable to Adam as well. “That must be it,” he said. “Evelyn called it ‘The Fright Zone.’”

“An apt name, I’m sure,” Kira ‘Na replied. “I have to admit that I get a chill just looking at it. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.

“Tellus has areas like this too,” he said, “far from your homeland, but nothing to this extent. It’s like that entire area has been scorched, for lack of a better term.”

“It’s an affront to nature,” she said quietly from beside him.

“I agree, but we still have to get closer. We need to see what we’re dealing with.” He began to make his way out of the forest but before he could take more than three steps, a long arrow struck a tree trunk mere inches from his head with an audible “thunk.” He turned, startled, and found Kira ‘Na surrounded by a small gang of humanoids. A man in rags, who reminded Adam of what farmers from his world looked like, held a knife to Kira ‘Na’s throat. Next to them was a man in red and gold armor and blue leggings, a fresh arrow loaded into his bow, which was now aimed squarely at Adam’s chest.

The man smiled as he spoke. “You’re not going anywhere.”



Adam awoke in a daze, unaware of his surroundings. He caught the scent of food and opened his eyes slowly and cautiously. He found himself lying on a bedroll within a small hut. A straw broom rested against the wall. In the center of the hut was a fire, the smoke escaping through a hole in the middle of the simple thatch roof. Hanging above the fire was a small cauldron, its boiling and bubbling the only audible noise he picked up on until he heard a woman's voice. "Oh, deary my! He's up already! A stout one, he is!" Adam groaned as he sat up and took in the sight of a small, rotund woman with blue skin, though she was certainly not a Gar. She wore a hat that seemed about five sizes too big, necessitating the need for her to cut eyeholes into it in an effort to see. He raised his eyebrow, puzzled at the odd adornment. Despite his feeling of unease at how he'd gotten here, he sensed no ill will from the woman. Noticing his expression, she frowned slightly before smiling at his reaction. "Well you look a bit odd to me as well, my lad. It's not every day we get visitors in the Whispering Woods, especially not ones with royal seals upon them."

The Eternian king looked down in surprise at her comment to see the embroidered patch she spoke of. They'd removed his cloak and exposed his family's crest, which he wore upon his tunic. For obvious reasons, he hadn't brought his crown on this mission, but in case he'd found himself in trouble, he felt the seal might be of some use to him. Of course, the trouble he found himself in now was so far from his home that such a thing was unlikely. Or maybe not, as things turned out. "Who are you?" he asked. "How did I get here?"

"I'm called lots of things, my dear," she answered, "but my friends call me 'Razz.' What got you here was the gas."

"Gas?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Bow had your attention with the arrow, but it was the one who crept behind you that you should have been watching, yes?" She posed it as a question and didn't speak, waiting for an answer.

"Well, yes, I suppose you're right."

“Of course I’m right, Deary! If I were wrong, you wouldn’t be here, would you?” She shook her head. “Silly humans. All alike, no matter where they’re from: dense as a fog in a bog.”

At her mention of fog, Adam rubbed his temples and found his own mental fog clearing. The act of his reaching up to rub his head brought to his attention that he was not bound in any way. Perhaps he wasn’t a prisoner after all, although he did notice the obvious absence of his sword. “I don’t suppose you can tell me what’s going on?” he asked.

“Oh well, not really, Deary. I just ply my trade here. It’s Glimmer and Bow you need to speak to, yes?”

“Um, yes. I suppose it is,” he answered.

“You’ll find your friend just outside the hut, my lad.” She moved her hands in a shooing motion. “Go on, go on. She’s been asking about you.”

My friend? Adam thought. *Kira ‘Na!* he remembered suddenly. *I hope she’s alright. This certainly is a strange place.* “Thank you,” he said as politely as possible as he stood up, nearly hitting his head on the inner roof of the small hut as he did so.

“Think nothing of it, my lad!” She paused a moment, her expression making it appear as if she were lost in thought. “What did I do, again, Deary?”

Adam shrugged. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I’m as confused as ever.”

“Well in that case, you’re most welcome!” she said excitedly. “I find I do my best work in a state of confusion, yes?”

This time he didn’t answer, but instead simply nodded and stepped cautiously outside into what he was surprised to find was a very dark night. He’d obviously been out of it for quite some time as it had been daylight when he and Kira ‘Na had been ambushed. *That must have been some powerful knockout gas if Razz thought my recovery was fast,* he realized. *I had to have been out for hours.* As he stepped out, he saw that there were several similar huts surrounding the one he’d emerged from, forming less of a village and more of an encampment. He had the distinct feeling that it was built to be disposable in case these people needed to move on with little warning. In the center of the camp was another fire, larger than the small cooking fire Razz had been using. Sitting around it, Adam caught sight of the man who had nearly shot him. Near him was a woman with blue hair and an outfit that matched it whom he hadn’t seen before. Sitting across from them, Adam saw the unmistakable silhouette of

his companion, Kira 'Na, who appeared unharmed, much to his relief.

Hearing the rustling of the hut's flap-like door due to his exit, all three looked in his direction. The two unknowns gave him a concerned look, Kira 'Na a smile. "Adam," she called to him, "it's alright. Come and join us."

Adam felt unsettled in this strange and unfamiliar place and couldn't help but feel that the small rotund woman he'd just met had somehow gotten the better of him. He needed to take charge of the situation and get himself back in control of it. No longer having the strength of He-Man to rely on, Adam reminded himself that he was a king and strode forward confidently, addressing the two unknowns with a voice brimming with authority. "Which one of you is Glimmering Bow?" he asked. When they heard his words, the two strangers laughed, causing Adam's face to flush. Even Kira 'Na smiled at his discomfort. Dropping his facade, he felt himself sigh. "Would it be too much trouble for someone to tell me what's going on?"

The woman with blue hair stood and walked toward him, her hand extended in greeting. "I'm sorry for the confusion, Adam. We thought you two were Horde spies. My name is Glimmer." He took her hand in response and shook it with some trepidation. "The man by the fire is Bow," she added.

Adam couldn't help but smile as he realized his blunder. "Well now I know your names, but who are you?" he asked. "I mean, who are you really?"

Glimmer smiled warmly, proud to announce their purpose. "We are the leaders of a movement against Hordak and his people. We call ourselves 'The Great Rebellion.'"

Bow laughed. "Although at this point, there isn't much great about it." Glimmer shot him a look and he shrugged, stoking the fire. Adam took notice of the man's cavalier mustache and noted that while many would not be able to pull it off, it suited the archer well.

"Come and join us by the fire. We'll explain everything." Glimmer smiled once more as she released his hand and sat back down by the flames.

"So we made it?" Adam asked. "This is Etheria?"

"Oh yes, definitely," Bow answered, "in all its glory. I apologize for almost shooting you, friend but as Glimmer's already said, we thought you were Horde spies. They're always looking for us. We must be ever careful. Luckily for you, Glimmer has a kinder heart than I and wanted to give you both the chance to explain yourselves." He nodded toward Kira 'Na. "Once you were out of

commission, your friend here came with us willingly, explaining on the way just what you were doing here. A fascinating story, although a bit unbelievable; you both travelling here from a different dimension and all.”

“I can assure you that it’s true,” Adam said as he sat down. “I’m here to find my father and uncle and then we’ll be out of your hair, I promise.” Adam noticed that the lie about his uncle Keldor was getting easier to tell each time. He forcibly shook the thought away.

“Well, I don’t know how you expect to do it,” Bow replied. “No one that goes into the Fright Zone returns, at least alive. We rebels have lost enough friends to know that much.”

“So I don’t suppose you’d be willing to help us?” Adam asked.

“It’s not so much willing as able, friend. We don’t yet have the resources. One day, maybe, with the right Intel, but as it is, it’s a suicide mission.”

“Well, I have to try,” Adam said. “We didn’t come all this way just to give up.”

“No one said anything about giving up, Adam,” Kira ‘Na replied. “Perhaps they can help us some other way?” She looked toward their hosts expectantly.

“I can promise you that we’ll try to think of something we can do to aid you,” Glimmer said, “but I can’t guarantee it.”

“Fair enough,” Adam replied. “Has Etheria always been like this? Has The Horde always been in control?”

“Oh, no,” Glimmer answered. “Etheria was once free from Hordak’s rule, many years ago. I was just a little girl then. The Fright Zone itself was once a beautiful place, an extension of the Whispering Woods, filled with streams and lakes. I can still remember it as such.” She sighed lightly. “The older I get, however, the more the memories fade. I fight hard to hold on to them. They’re a part of what drives me to rid this world of The Horde’s presence, to return it to the beauty it once had.”

“But we haven’t been able to do much, as yet,” Bow continued, picking up where she left off. “As I said, we just don’t have enough knowledge of the Fright Zone’s inner workings. We’ve been able to learn their schedules and such in the past, but they’re always changing. Each time we verify a good lead, it quickly becomes worthless. So we bide our time, rally more people to our cause, and hope for a breakthrough. Some of the people are beginning to lose hope,

though, myself as well, I admit, but I'll never stop fighting. The Horde has taken away so much from the people of this world. I'd die just to get a bit of it back, just to show Hordak that we will never accept his rule."

Adam nodded in understanding. He could only imagine the fear that these people must live with on a daily basis. The only thing he could relate to that would come close to their situation was the possibility that Skeletor could have won, before the Mystic Wall was erected. He imagined a lifetime of living in darkness, under Skeletor's rule. Again, he could only imagine. Not for the first time, he was thankful for his peaceful upbringing due to the Sorceress's Mystic Wall, before its destruction allowed Skeletor to return to Eternia. "There isn't anything at all regular about their schedule?" he asked. "Something that doesn't change? Preferably something that would cause enough of a distraction that Kira 'Na and I could get in unseen?"

"But you'd never get out," Glimmer remarked.

"We wouldn't need to," Adam explained, "not with the Havok Staff. It's the enchanted weapon that brought us here." He was relieved to see that Kira 'Na still had it, now laid by her side.

"It's quite impressive," Bow remarked. "We have artifacts like it on Etheria too, but Hordak has taken possession of all the ones he considers weapons."

"Speaking of weapons," Adam interjected, "I don't suppose I can have my sword back?"

"Oh yes, of course," Glimmer said. She looked to Bow, who pulled it from a sheath on his hip.

"It's a big one," Bow remarked as he handed it over. "Not trying to compensate for a lack of confidence, are you?" he said with a laugh.

"It was a gift," Adam said, unable to stop a smile from crossing his face. He'd indeed brought some luck with him on this trip, to be captured by enemies of The Horde instead of the dark army itself. More than that, they seemed like good people.

"When it comes to a distraction, I have a thought," Glimmer said, the crackling of the fire growing louder as Bow stoked it once more.

"Anything that can be of help to us is much appreciated," Adam said.

"I don't know if it will be of use," she admitted, "but once a year, Hordak's generals and the leaders of the other worlds that he controls come here to pay

tribute to him, bringing him gifts and news of their planets. It's all capped off with a feast. In reality, it's one of the most heavily patrolled nights of the year, but it's also the busiest and possibly the easiest for two people, such as you, to sneak in. No one tries to get into the Fright Zone, most would be trying to get out, so it's possible that there will be weak point, something you two can exploit."

"Sounds like our best shot," Adam agreed. "So when is this night of tribute?"

"In just a week's time," Bow answered. "The timing of your arrival is a welcome coincidence. You have luck on your side, it would seem."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Adam said, nodding. "Still, it would be nice if we had a little something more to go on."

"I could find out!" All four of them were startled by what sounded like a child's voice coming from a nearby tree. Adam focused his eyes on the spot he thought it had come from, but didn't see anything. Suddenly a small creature, only slightly more than knee-high, ran out from the tree, where it had blended in, almost perfectly matching the tree's garish colors. "You didn't see me, see? I can hide anywhere! Name's Loo-Kee!" It was dressed in red, had blue hair, and a bushy tail. It was probably the most non-threatening woodland creature Adam had ever laid his eyes upon.

"Loo-Kee, no," Glimmer said. "It's far too dangerous."

"But I can do it," the creature pleaded. "No one will see me, I swear. I'm not going to talk to anyone, I'm just going to look around, see if I can find a place for these nice people to get in."

"What would your father say, Loo-Kee?" Bow asked. "He'd never forgive us if something happened to you."

Loo-Kee crossed his tiny arms. "I may be small, but I'm not a child and you know it," he squeaked angrily. "I'm more than able."

"Well, it's your choice, of course," Bow said.

"Bow, we can't let him!" Glimmer exclaimed.

Bow shrugged. "It's his decision, Glimmer."

"Look," Adam said, "we don't want any trouble, but Loo-Kee, if you're sure you can get in and out without being seen, and that you won't get hurt, we really could use the help."

“I’m sure, Mister. I’m a Kon-Seal. We’re great at blending in. Watch!” With the words, Loo-Kee slowly but seamlessly blended in with the trees behind him. Adam assumed that it was some kind of defense mechanism before Loo-Kee confirmed it, the small creature changing back to his usual garish colors as he spoke. “It helps us stay safe. We’re not exactly scary looking,” he laughed.

“Then thank you,” Adam replied, “but please be careful. I don’t want anyone getting hurt for our sakes. We didn’t come here to interfere.”

“Hey, I may be cute as a button,” Loo-Kee joked, “but I hate The Horde as much as anybody. This place used to be pretty, or so my dad says. It’s a shame what they’ve done to it. I wanna help. No one else can do it, believe me.”

“Again, thank you,” Adam replied.

Glimmer forced a smile as the Kon-Seal made his way back into the woods, already making his way toward the Fright Zone. Bow put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “He’ll be OK, Glimmer. No Horde member is going to be looking for a Kon-Seal running around the place. He’ll be back before you know it.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said softly.

“Well,” Bow replied, “like I said before, for a ‘Great Rebellion,’ we’re not that great yet. We need all the help we can get.”

13.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Despara stood silently in Skeletor's cell, contemplating recent revelations. According to Randor, Skeletor had indeed told her the truth about her origins. What she didn't understand was why. The disfigured sorcerer obviously had some game that he was playing, but even with all of her training in strategy and understanding the motivations of her enemies, she couldn't come up with a single reason for him to have done so. She needed answers and was here to receive them, despite her recent feelings of unease when in his presence. "Why did you tell me about Randor?" she asked. "What do you hope to gain from my speaking with him?"

"So you have spoken to him?" the sorcerer asked, glancing up from his meditations.

"I will not say one way or the other," she said.

"You have, then." His skeletal jaw lowered slightly in a mock-smile. "I told you before; I simply wish to reunite a daughter with her true father."

"But why?" she asked, confused. "I don't understand."

“You don’t need to understand. Rest assured that it is the truth and leave it at that.” His gaze burned into her. “Why are you here?”

She paced lightly before answering. Due in large part to Skeletor’s words, Despara was as lost as she’d ever been. Although she wanted to project the confident image she was used to portraying, she no longer felt confident around this man. He had humbled her in their last encounter. She hadn’t yet forgotten it and doubted she ever would. Normally strong-willed and sure of herself, no one in her life had humbled her before, with the exception of Hordak and Shadow Weaver, and even that had been when she was a child. It was not a feeling she was used to having as an adult. “I know now that you were always in control during our encounters, that I was being a fool. I feel the need to start anew.”

“Refreshing,” he said quietly. “Why?”

She leveled her gaze at him in turn. “You obviously know things about me. First I want to know how, and second I want to know more.”

“Demanding, aren’t we?” Skeletor asked with a slight chuckle. “The how is easy enough, but I won’t be revealing that quite yet. Let’s just say that we share a bond.”

“What kind of bond?” she asked.

He waved his finger mockingly, as one would when scolding a child. “Now now,” he said, “I told you, I’m saving that one.”

“Fine, then at least tell me more about my origins,” she said.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

“Something Randor surely does not. Why was I taken by Hordak, and not my brother?”

“Randor told you of your brother, did he?” The smile again. “Good, good. All I know is that Hordak saw the both of you in a vision and knew that you would be very powerful. He craves nothing if not power.”

“Is my brother powerful?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” Skeletor replied, “very powerful indeed. The most physically powerful being I’ve ever encountered. He has literally moved mountains.”

“Then why did Hordak not take him?” she asked. “For all of my skill in battle, I am no demi-god.”

Skeletor paused a moment in thought. "Your brother is a good man, sickeningly so. Perhaps Hordak sensed that he would be too difficult to control, to twist to his purposes, even as a child."

"And me?"

"Well, I think we already have the answer to that question." He looked her up and down, taking in the sight of her sleek black and gray armor and the frightful mask that hid her humanity away from prying eyes. "Tell me, Force Captain, how many have you killed in his name?"

"Enough," she answered, not with a voice full of pride, but conviction. She had done her duty.

He nodded. "I thought as much. Then the answer is simple: he took you because you were the weak one." Her eyes narrowed beneath her mask and she felt her teeth grit with anger. Skeletor chuckled again in reaction. "Ah yes, don't you see? You are quick to anger, quick to strike, quick to rip the life from your enemies. And best of all, you obey his every command. You, my dear, are the perfect weapon in Hordak's eyes."

She braced her back against the wall of his cell. What if Skeletor was right and she was merely Hordak's weapon and nothing more? Could that really be true? She wasn't so sure. "But what of my mother? Shadow Weaver loves me in her own way."

"That may be true," he replied, "but it's not a normal mother's love. You'd be a fool to think so. That witch has very little left of her that is human. I've known her since before you were born and I've never seen her care about anything, save for herself."

"She sounds like you," Despara scoffed.

"Like us, you mean," Skeletor countered, "but yes, I suppose that's why Shadow Weaver and I got along so well in those days. We've always had much in common."

"Why did you betray Hordak?" she asked.

His scoffed, sounding disappointed. "So as soon as the subject gets uncomfortable, you change it? You're suddenly curious about me now? What makes me tick? No more personal revelations for you today, Force Captain?"

Despara looked away. "It was only a question."

He nodded once more, amused. “As I told you before, Hordak betrayed me, though I would have turned on him eventually. He was right about that. I am my own master. That is reason enough for me to betray your precious leader.”

“I’ve done some research into you,” she said cautiously, “looked you up in the Horde archives.”

“Amusing,” he said. “And what glorious battles does it speak of in relation to my time here?”

“There’s not much of anything there, actually. I assume much of it has been erased.” She could sense the vain man’s disappointment. “I did find one piece of information interesting, though” she added.

“Pray tell.”

“It said you are from Tellus,” she said.

He seemed to be waiting for more. When she didn’t continue he broke the silence. “What are you getting at?”

“What is your connection to this man Randor?” she asked. “I find it hard to believe that it’s a coincidence you are from the same world, especially when it’s one that doesn’t even lie within this dimension.”

Skeletor laughed quietly to himself. “That’s a story for another day.”

She sighed audibly. “As you wish. I trust we’ll continue this conversation some other time, then?” There was a touch of defiance to her voice, despite the feelings of reservation she had around the dark sorcerer.

“When the mood strikes me,” he said in response.

“Fair enough, I suppose.” This conversation hadn’t helped her state of mind, she realized. If anything, it had worsened it. As she walked to the door to leave, she began to hum a short little tune, something her mother would sing to her when she was a child, before the days of her harsh training began. The sound of it had always soothed her and soothing was something she needed as so many truths were being revealed as of late, throwing her into mental turmoil. Upon hearing her, Skeletor stood and gripped her right arm firmly to keep her from leaving.

“What is that song?” he asked quickly.

She struggled to break free from his grip, but was unable. “Just

something Shadow Weaver would hum and sing when I was a child,” she answered. “Nothing more.”

“It sounds strangely familiar,” he said, curious.

“Perhaps,” she conceded, “but it’s just a song. It’s insignificant.” As she spoke, she remembered the words of Hordak from when she had returned from Elesian with a musical tone not long before: *nothing is insignificant*. Skeletor recognizing the song had to mean something, but what?

She glanced at him and saw that he looked curious, his yellow-green skull cocked slightly to the side. “Yes, I suppose it is,” he said quietly as he let go of her arm. He sat back down on his cell’s cot, appearing to be in deep thought.

What more does he know? Despara thought to herself. What other secrets does he hide within that ghastly skull of his? And what do they mean to me?

■ ■ ■

Leaving Skeletor’s cell, Despara made her way to Randor’s. She still had questions to ask the man whom she had been told was her true father. Questions she felt that Skeletor would not have the answer to. Upon hearing the sound of his cell door opening, Randor shot upward from the cot upon which he sat. *Perhaps he had expected guards or Catra once more*, Despara thought. When he saw that it was her, he appeared to relax. Perhaps he had been hoping to see her, she thought. He was not completely at ease, however, and she was glad for it. She didn’t wish for him to become too comfortable around her. Despara didn’t want a new father. She wanted answers.

When she sat on the bench opposite him, he sat back down and looked hard at her mask. He seemed to be trying to peer beneath the lenses that covered her eyes. He wouldn’t be seeing anything within them. Her disguise had no such imperfections. She thought for a long moment in silence before removing her helmet, the snapping of its clasps the only audible sound in the room. She lifted it over her head and rested it gently next to her. Running her hands through her short hair, she pushed the stray strands back and out of her eyes. It was getting too long for her tastes. She’d have to remember to shorten

it. Despara glanced upward and saw a look in the man's eyes that she hadn't seen in months, the same look he'd had when he'd first laid eyes upon her in Hordak's throne room: happiness at seeing her face mixed with an underlying weariness and regret.

"By the Goddess, you really do look just like your mother," Randor said. "She had dark hair, but everything else," he paused, taking in the sight of her, "it's like looking at an old holo-image of her from when we'd first met." *She looks so young*, he thought, *that it's hard to believe*.

"I want you to tell me about her," Despara said simply.

Randor fought back a smile. He was happy to know that this girl, whom he'd once thought of as nothing but another of Hordak's creatures, twisted and corrupt, wanted to learn more about herself. It showed promise. '*This girl*,' he thought. She was so much more than that. She was Adora! She was his daughter! *My girl*, he corrected himself. *Our girl*. He couldn't just cast her aside after he'd longed his entire life to gaze upon her face once more. He'd thought her as a monster, forever corrupted by the dark lord of The Horde into the creature known as Despara, but here she was, sitting before him, revealing her true face to him. Perhaps there was some hope to be found in this foul place after all. "Well, she was very stubborn," he began, "but she was intelligent enough to make up for it. Her stubbornness had a purpose and she was usually in the right. When we first met, she wasn't very familiar with Eternian customs and laws, yet she was always about three steps ahead of me when it came to the tough decisions. She was wise beyond her years, especially when it came to matters of the heart."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"She always had the interests of the people in mind, first and foremost."

She turned her nose up in disgust. "The commoners? Why?"

Randor sighed. "Knowing how The Horde treats their subjects, it's no wonder to me that you don't understand. Everyone is equal, Adora," he saw her flinch at the name, but noticed she said nothing, "with no one of more importance than the other. A farmer is just as important as a warrior, for without the farmer, what would the warrior eat? How would he survive?"

"But you are a king," she said. "Are you not above them?"

"I was a king," he clarified. "Your brother Adam has that responsibility now. But no, I was not above them. It is a king's duty to serve his people, to

make life as good for them as possible, not to rule over them with an iron fist. Do you have to enforce the law? Yes, of course. You even make new ones when situations call for them, but it is all in the service of the people as a whole.”

Her brow furrowed as he spoke. “So you serve your people? Was it due to your service to your people that you did not come for me after I was taken from you?” she asked. He couldn’t fail to notice the hurt in her voice, along with an undercurrent of anger. “Were your responsibilities to your people greater than those of your family?”

The question cut Randor to his core. *If she only knew.* “I would have given up my kingdom a thousand times over to have you back in our arms, Adora. I suppose Skeletor didn’t tell you the part about how I rushed after him, foolhardy and enraged, in an attempt to find out where Hordak had taken you? The ruling of Eternia nearly fell to your mother that day, as I could have easily been killed, but I cared for nothing but finding you.”

“So Skeletor was involved in my abduction?” she asked, feeling her anger rise once more.

“Not directly. Hordak attacked Skeletor and left him and a woman named Evil-Lyn behind on Tellus as punishment,” he answered.

Punishment? she asked herself silently. *Why not just kill them?* She didn’t have an answer. It wasn’t like Hordak to do such a thing. It appeared to her to be a rare sign of weakness from the Horde leader. “Why would Hordak attack him?”

“I don’t know the details, but if Skeletor told you that he left The Horde of his own accord, then he lied. With you and Hordak gone, I went after Skeletor for revenge, but was prevented from killing him. I would have tried a thousand times more, but a Mystic Wall created by a powerful sorceress prevented me from going back. More than that, I realized that your mother needed me, that Adam needed a father. You, as much as I hate to admit it even now, were lost to me.”

“So Skeletor did not tell you that I had been taken here?” she asked.

“He told me that he didn’t know where you had been taken. The Horde had a way of just appearing where they wanted. Be it magic or science, I do not know, but Skeletor claimed that you could have been taken anywhere in a thousand galaxies. I had no way of finding you, and it tore out a piece of my heart that I’ve never gotten back. I used all of my resources and any favors I had collected to search for you, but there was no trace left behind. Nothing.”

Despara immediately found her thoughts drawn to the mysterious device Hordak had attached to her stealth fighter before her mission to Elesian. It had taken her galaxies away in mere seconds. That must have been what Hordak's army had used to invade Eternia, dropping in on the kingdom of her birth without a moment's notice. She almost mentioned the device to Randor, but held her tongue. She didn't fully trust him yet, and he didn't appear to have any more information on it than what he'd already told her. Instead, she steered the conversation back to her mother. "Tell me more of my birth mother. What was her name?"

"I'm sorry. I can't believe I haven't already told you. This is as strange to me as it is you. Her name was Marlana."

"Marlana?" she asked, the sound of the unfamiliar name stirring something within her.

"Yes," he answered. "Such a beautiful name. She loved you so much, Adora, so much. Losing you nearly broke her. If not for her having to be a mother to Adam, I'm sure it would have. I can still remember her smile, the brightness of her eyes, even the smell of her perfume. 'Summer Fire,' the people called it. Scarletian flowers, I believe was the scent's origin. It fit your mother so well. It was intoxicating." He stopped speaking, the memories of his wife vivid in his mind's eye.

"I am unfamiliar," Despara said. She stood and reached for her mask.

"Are you leaving? I still have so much to tell you," he said, almost pleading.

"Yes." She replaced her mask, hearing the hiss of air as it pressurized around her. She set it to remain motionless in an attempt to hide the turmoil that played across her face. "You are not the only one I seek answers from." She turned to leave.

"You should not believe anything more that Skeletor tells you," Randor said quickly. "He has told you the truth so far, but—"

"I will be the judge of who I should and shouldn't talk to," she interrupted. "Just because we are speaking now, don't presume that you have any authority over me. In many ways, I have far more in common with Skeletor than I do with you."

"Adora," Randor paused, having a difficult time finding the proper words, "I'm sorry that this has happened to you. There has not been a day in my life that

I haven't thought of you, that I haven't wished I'd been strong enough to stop Hordak from taking you, that I haven't loved you. I've never stopped loving you."

"I'm sorry that I can't return the sentiment, Randor." She turned and looked back at him, a seemingly broken man sitting on his simple cot, imprisoned within a cold cell. "I never knew you existed." The sound of the opening door filled the small room and Despara stepped out into the hallway before it closed. She didn't look back.

As she made her way down the hall, she raised her left gauntlet and pressed a button before speaking into it. "Computer: search term 'scarletian flower.'"

Almost immediately, a holo-image was projected from her armor of a bright red flower, with blue leaves. She had never seen anything like it. "*Scarletian flower,*" the electronic voice began, "*noun. Native to the planet Tellus, the scarletian flower is often used as the base for perfumes. Its scent often described as sunny and floral, the perfume's primary note is—*"

"Stop," she said before the voice could continue. "Can a scarletian perfume be synthesized from Etherian flowers of a similar scent?"

"*Calculating,*" it said before a slight pause. "*Using a mixture of seven different Etherian flowers and five additives, scarletian perfume can be replicated with a ninety seven percent accuracy rate.*"

"Do we have all the ingredients in storage?"

"*Affirmative.*"

"Then do it. Have one of the robotic drones create it and have it delivered to my quarters."

14.

THE BETRAYER

Adam sat with Kira 'Na in the hut the rebellion had provided them and wondered how this mission could possibly succeed. It had been two days and they'd yet to hear back from Loo-Kee. The small creature had been eager to help, but Adam couldn't help but fear that he'd sent the Kon-Seal to his death. Without Loo-Kee's information, the mission was as good as over before it had even begun. Regardless, he tried to maintain his tenuous grip on hope.

Kira 'Na sat nearby, polishing her sword. They'd spent the last two days training with the Rebellion. Many of the rebels were farmers or merchants, and had little experience on the field of battle. Bow had taken it upon himself to train them in both archery and swordplay. Adam had helped and while he'd seen improvement in the rebels, he had to admit that the sessions had helped him even more. He may no longer be able to become He-Man, but his skills with a sword hadn't withered and died as he'd once feared. Testing them had bolstered his confidence. Kira 'Na had joined in as well, and he was even more impressed with her skill than his own. He worried, however, of her reaction to the truth he'd hidden. What would happen if they did manage to get inside and rescue his father? What would happen when she realized that Keldor was not on this planet, at least in the state that she had known him? She was sure to be

angry, perhaps even furious with him for his deception. Adam had never been good at lying. It was amazing that he'd kept his identity as He-Man a secret for so long, much less at all. He had to admit that he was glad he was bad at it. Lying wasn't a skill he admired, and it didn't hurt his feelings that he was not gifted in that regard. When this was all said and done, he swore that he would never get anyone's help under false pretenses again.

"What are you thinking about?" the older woman asked him. It was easy for Adam to forget that she was at least as old as his father. Her life as a warrior had kept her in spectacular shape. She seemed half her age, if that.

"I was just thinking of my father and this mission," he answered. "I hope that we can be successful."

She smiled. "Have faith, Adam. You Eternians have a knack for surviving despite the odds. I know Keldor did, anyway."

"Tell me about him," Adam said. "Please." He was honestly curious. He knew of his uncle from a few of his father's stories and of course from Evelyn's journal, but was well aware that both sources must have been skewed in their own way due to their individual feelings for Keldor, which differed greatly from each other, to boot. It would be interesting to hear more from this woman who had also known his uncle before his secret transformation into Skeletor.

Kira 'Na leaned against the sturdy wall of the hut and thought back to her youth. "Well, I didn't know him long, only a day really, but he was not someone you could easily forget. You have to understand that most of the Gar I'd encountered up until that point, and indeed even afterward, were brutish and not the most attractive examples of the species. The Gar are naturally proficient in magic and their scientific know-how is surprising. Most are known for their war-like nature, but Keldor was different from all of the others I've come into contact with. He was certainly brash and a bit egotistical, but he was also handsome and more than able to handle himself in battle. In fact, he was one of the finest swordsmen that I've ever encountered. Although my freedom and that of my cellmates was due to his wanting to be free himself, he could have simply left us behind. He chose not to. I don't feel as if it's my place to question his reasons. They may not have been entirely altruistic, but he freed me from that monster Arkonus and saved my life regardless. Why question his motives? I am merely grateful."

"Grateful enough that you would risk your life, even all these years later, to save him?" he asked.

“My presence here should be answer enough,” she answered.

Adam nodded in understanding before they heard the flap of the hut’s entrance being pulled open. When he turned to see who it was, he caught sight of Bow in the entryway. The man’s expression, which was usually surprisingly jovial, was instead quite serious. “We’ve just received word of a disturbance in the village of Thaymor. Horde troopers are having an issue with a woman, and she doesn’t seem to be one of the locals. I know you two aren’t official members of the rebellion, but it would be nice to have your help.”

“Of course,” Adam said as he stood and reached for the Sword of Protection. Adam was never one to turn down help to those who needed it, and anything was better than sitting here with his worries. “Lead the way.” Adam and Kira ‘Na exited the hut to see that Glimmer was there with several other civilian members of the resistance, all of which waited for them on the outside.

Adam sheathed his sword and waved politely to Glimmer, who smiled but merely said, “It’s this way,” before turning and leading the group further into the forest.

Kira ‘Na turned to Bow. “This village called Thaymor, does it hold any significance?”

“Other than the fact that it remains free of The Horde, very little,” the archer answered, “but it’s right on the border of their territory. It’s not unusual for troopers to come down from their outpost on Talon Mountain to harass them, but we’ve managed to keep the village free so far. It’s a small victory, but it’s something.”

After walking for some time in silence, Adam heard the familiar sound of running water. “I spent some time going over your maps,” he said. “Is that the Singing River that I hear?”

“Yes,” Glimmer responded. “It runs around the mountain, but leads directly into hostile territory, so other than using it for fishing you don’t see too many boats on it.”

Adam nodded. While he hoped that Loo-Kee would return soon, he had been trying to come up with other possibilities just in case that didn’t happen. “I had been thinking that it would be a good alternative way to get into the Fright Zone undetected, if it were under cover of night.”

Bow shook his head, “Only if you don’t mind getting blasted into smithereens by underwater mines.”

“Oh,” Adam replied. “Well, it was just a thought.” *Loo-Kee, it looks like we need you more than ever*, he thought. *I haven’t been able to come up with any other viable plans and we can’t just walk right in. I hope you return soon.*

Before long, they came upon the village of Thaymor and could hear the commotion from their position at the edge of the Whispering Woods. Approaching the village, they saw a group of a half-dozen troopers surrounding a young woman dressed in bright yellows and blues, a stark contrast not only to the Horde troopers’ gray and black armor, but of the simpler clothes worn by the villagers as well. It didn’t take much deduction for Adam to realize that the woman was not a Thaymor native, just as Bow had indicated. He turned to the archer, who nodded before pulling the red hood of his cape over his head. He’d mentioned to Adam in the days before that he was of noble blood himself, and had to keep his face hidden in an effort to not be recognized by the Horde soldiers. Glimmer was in fact a princess of the kingdom of Bright Moon, but her defiant streak showed as she did nothing to hide her identity. Adam was sure that Bow would be just as bold, but the man had friends and family back home that he had to protect. As Bow readied his weapon by pulling it from his back and loading it with an arrow, Adam followed suit and removed the Sword of Protection from its sheath. “I think we’d all appreciate it,” Bow called out to the troopers, “if you’d leave the lady alone and crawl back into your respective holes.”

The troopers all turned suddenly at the sound of Bow’s voice, ignoring the brightly clad woman for the moment. “It’s the rebels!” one of them called out. They drew their energy crossbows and fired in the direction of Adam and his group. Before the blasts could hit them however, the Stone of Protection embedded within Adam’s sword suddenly began glowing a bright red, throwing a magical shield around himself and his companions that absorbed the energy blasts harmlessly.

“Whoa!” Bow exclaimed.

“Exactly what I was thinking!” Adam replied. “I’m still getting used to this thing. Quick, while they’re distracted!” With that, Adam rushed the troopers alongside the rebels. He swung his sword in a sharp downward arc, shattering the energy weapon of the closest trooper. Bow took out the other crossbows likewise; either knocking them free from their opponents’ hands with a well-placed kick or shooting them through with his arrows, stunningly sharp enough to pierce their armor plating.

As the rebels took the fight to the troopers, who had drawn shock-sticks in

these close quarters after losing their long-range weapons, Adam noticed that the woman they were protecting was doing a fine job on her own. Her hands glowed with magic as she blasted the Horde members, knocking them down in some cases and sending them flying in others. Perhaps she didn't need as much help as the rebels had thought. Adam continued pressing on, two troopers taking him on at the same time. *So much for fighting fair*, Adam thought. *Not that I'm not used to it*. He parried the shock-stick of the trooper on his right before continuing his spin and following through to destroy the weapon of his other attacker. Cursing while grabbing his stinging hand, the trooper on his left backed up a pace, giving Adam the opportunity to once again focus his efforts on the first.

Having recovered from Adam knocking aside his weapon moments before, the trooper on the right was back at it, jabbing his shock-stick toward Adam's chest, looking to take him out of the fight with an electrically charged blast to the chest. Adam dodged the weapon and grabbed it in his free left hand, turning it back toward his assailant. When the trooper's armor came into contact with the end of the stick, it sparked and short circuited, causing his opponent to collapse in a heap, the weight of his own armor now too much for him to bear. Adam took the stick and flipped it around in his hand, shoving it at his other opponent who quickly turned and fled.

Kira 'Na and Glimmer were working well together, Adam noticed, and it was a good feeling to know that he and his companion meshed so well with the Etherians. Added to that fact, the other rebels had also learned a lot from Bow's training and before long, the rest of the troopers retreated from the village as well, heading back in the direction of Talon Mountain to fight another day. Adam dropped the Horde weapon and glanced down at the familiar sword in his right hand. He felt both proud and relieved at their victory. He may not be He-Man anymore, but power of Grayskull or not, he still had more than a decade's worth of fighting experience and knowledge to help keep him alive. More than that, the sword, aided by the Stone of Protection, continued to surprise him. This had been his first real test in battle since he'd joined the swords and he finally felt that he had a chance against The Horde. He smiled at his new friends as they celebrated their minor victory. The woman they had helped joined them as they made their way back to their camp, telling them her story on the way.



Adam and his companion Kira 'Na sat around the campfire with Bow, Glimmer, Razz, and their newest arrival, the young woman they'd helped in the village. She was younger than Adam had expected. Her name was Castaspella. She was from a floating city called Mystacor, and had come to Thaymor looking for the rebels. She'd found them, but not in the way that she'd hoped. In the end, though, no rebels had been seriously injured in the skirmish and the Etherians were all pleased to have won even a minor victory over The Horde forces. While they had gotten some very basic background info on the mystical sorceress on their way back to their camp, they had yet to hear her actual reason for seeking them out. When she finally told them, it floored them. "I know who Shadow Weaver really is," she said, her soft voice tinged with fear.

Adam sat forward, listening intently. Shadow Weaver was the woman in red he'd seen in the vision of his father. He could only imagine the importance of this information to his new friends, but he was also keenly interested in any information regarding her that could aid him and Kira 'Na in their mission. Although he hoped to avoid the evil witch of The Horde, he knew that a confrontation with Shadow Weaver was not only possible, but likely. "Who?" he was the first to ask.

"I'm not sure of her birth name, but I knew her as 'Light Spinner.' She was a good woman once, or at least not the creature she has become," Castaspella continued.

"How do you know that this woman you once knew is Shadow Weaver?" Glimmer asked.

"Because I was there when she fell to darkness," she said. "We were sisters, not by blood, but by magic. We trained together many years ago under a powerful sorcerer named Norwyn."

Adam thought back to Evelyn's journal and the tale told of her and Skeletor joining The Horde. In that story, Shadow Weaver was already a presence in Hordak's army. "But that's not possible," Adam interrupted. "I've heard tales of Shadow Weaver and she's been with The Horde since long before I was even born. I was under the impression that The Horde had been on Etheria for much less time than that."

"You are not from here, King Adam. You don't understand," the sorceress from Mystacor told him. "Hordak knew about Etheria long before he made it his base. I don't know the stories you speak of, but I can tell you that this did indeed

happen long before you were born, before The Horde invaded Etheria in force.”

“But you don’t appear to be any older than Glimmer here,” he replied. “How old can you be? You don’t look a day over eighteen.”

“Appearances are often deceiving, Outworlder, especially when it comes to magic.”

Remembering Evelyn and how she appeared to be no older than Teela, despite being decades older, he acquiesced. Magic truly did seem to have an effect on its users, not the least of which was a longer lifespan. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, “I’m just trying to understand.”

“It will make sense before the end, Adam. Please just trust me.”

“Of course,” he responded, although he still felt something was off about the timing. Could there be a difference between how time passed on Etheria as opposed to Tellus? He supposed it could. There were dimensions between them, after all. Or was there something more? Something he was missing?

“This all happened long ago,” Castaspella continued. “Light Spinner and I were both apprenticed to Norwyn. We had a sense of competitiveness between us yes, but we were not enemies. We lived together in the Temple of Light on the floating city of Mystacor, located not far from here, and knew more of each other than even our families could claim. Even still, I never would have expected her to betray not only Norwyn, but Etheria as a whole.”

“Wait a minute,” Glimmer interrupted. “Are you telling me that the Betrayer was Shadow Weaver?”

“Yes.”

“The Betrayer?” Adam asked.

Bow nodded. “It’s long been known that Hordak couldn’t have taken Etheria without the help of a native. Etheria’s magic is too powerful and was always the main reason he wanted it under his control. There have been rumors about it for years, but we never had any idea who it could have been. Castaspella, you’re saying that it was your friend?”

“Yes,” she answered, becoming a little impatient at the constant interruptions. “If you’d kindly let me continue, I’ll explain everything.”

“Yes, of course,” Glimmer said. “Please forgive us, it’s not often we hear stories like yours.”

“It’s alright,” Castaspella responded, “I also apologize for my impatience, but I’ve been waiting to tell this story for more years than you could know. Light Spinner was older than I was by several years, but we were at the same level of training. She was not progressing in her studies as quickly as she would have liked and she took the easy path to power, rather than one of patience and study. I’m not sure exactly when it happened, but at some point during our training, Light Spinner was approached by Hordak in spirit form. The dark lord was still imprisoned in Despondos at the time, but he’d learned to project his essence to worlds strong in magic. I don’t know what was promised to Light Spinner in exchange for her help, but I’m sure power was at the core of the offer. As much as I loved Light Spinner, I could see that she trained not for the goal of protecting Etheria, but because she sought power for herself. She was frustrated by the slow rate of her learning and wanted more, and quickly. Blinded by both youth and our friendship, I never thought of her selfishness as dangerous. If only I had known how wrong I was.

“Hordak guided her to an Etherian artifact called the Gem of Shadows,” she continued, “which she stole from the Mystacor archives. She sought to absorb its vast powers, but only managed to take in a third of the gem’s magic before Norwyn discovered her and destroyed it. Unfortunately, a third of the gem’s power was more than enough to grant her the ability to destroy our master and Norwyn, whom Light Spinner and I had both once cared for almost as a father, fell by her hands before my very eyes. I fled, knowing that I couldn’t stop her, but it was useless. She appeared before me in an explosion of red smoke, rising like a wraith from the darkness. I froze as she harshly grabbed me by the wrists, taking me to a tall magical mirror within the archives. It was then that my friend, my sister, threw me into an enchanted looking glass, trapping me in the timeless void beyond. I only recently escaped, by luck or by miracle, I do not know. All I know is that when I awoke, the mirror had broken, and I was free, just as you see me now. This was many years ago, before any of you drew your first breaths. After my escape, I realized that while I haven’t aged, much time has passed. To you this is all the distant past. To me, it was last week.”

“But if this all happened before we were born, why did Hordak wait so long to invade Etheria?” Bow asked.

“I’m not sure,” Castaspella answered. “I can only assume that he wanted to wait until he’d been freed of Despondos. It is my understanding that he is here in his physical body, yes?”

“Yes,” Bow answered. “I’ve seen him myself; back before I joined the Great Rebellion.”

“Then that must be the reason. What happened to the Council of Kings?” Castaspella asked. “Did they fall to The Horde?”

“The Council of Kings,” Glimmer explained to Adam and Kira ‘Na, “was exactly what it sounds like: a union of Etheria’s monarchs, bound together in harmony to protect this planet.” She turned to Castaspella. “I’m afraid they were destroyed. It’s a mystery as to how.”

“Not anymore,” Castaspella interjected. “Norwyn, Light Spinner and I were the only three people outside of the Council who knew of their secret meeting place, for it was within Mystacor. It doesn’t take much sleuthing to realize what happened.”

“At some point after Hordak was freed from Despondos, Shadow Weaver told him where they were,” Glimmer said before pausing, “and he killed them.”

“Yes,” Castaspella said. “It would seem so.”

“So this woman Light Spinner is the Betrayer. She became Shadow Weaver and betrayed our planet to The Horde,” Glimmer said.

“Yes.”

Bow shook his head. “Although anything learned about our enemies is a boon to us, I wish that this new information was more useful. Our knowing who Shadow Weaver is isn’t enough to truly help us if we ever come in direct contact with her.”

Castaspella met his gaze. “It does if you know how to stop her.”

15.

THE EVERDREAM

Despara held the bottle in her hand. It had been delivered nearly an hour before, but she had yet to open it. *How could something so simple prove to be so difficult?* she asked herself. The bottle contained perfume genetically engineered by a Horde robot to smell like one that had belonged to her mother; her real mother. She knew that the chances of her recognizing it were slim-to-none. According to the story, she had been stolen away as an infant. Remembering her birth mother was probably impossible. Despite this, she knew that the olfactory senses were some of the strongest triggers of memory there were. Whether the perfume triggered a memory or not, she had to admit that she was more than just curious to smell her birth mother's favorite fragrance. No, it was more than curiosity. It was necessity. Ever since Randor had mentioned it, the thought of inhaling the scent was overwhelming. So why couldn't she bring herself to do it now that she had the opportunity?

Was it fear? What if it triggered nothing at all? What if the entire story was a lie? Surely that would be for the best, would it not? It was better than her entire life being a lie told to her since before she could walk. She had dreamt of the name Adora, but that could simply be a coincidence. Her dreams were powerful enough to pierce Hordak's spell, so they could certainly be strong

enough to pierce the Eternian prisoner's mind and draw out the name. She knew that Shadow Weaver could peer into one's thoughts. Perhaps she had developed this skill as well. Did she really want to be a stolen child? Or was the better alternative to be Force Captain of The Horde, to be the daughter of Hordak and Shadow Weaver, the two most powerful beings on all of Etheria, if not the universe itself? She supposed that she could also fear that the story was true, for all of the same reasons. All of her privileges could evaporate like the water left behind after a summer rain.

The Force Captain stood alone in her quarters, dressed only in her bodysuit. Her helmet, boots and cape were spread neatly across one of the room's two chairs. The Force Captain's hair was still longer than she was used to. She hadn't taken the time to cut it. Her altered appearance made Despara question her identity even more whenever she saw her reflection. She wondered why she didn't just take care of it. She was used to a rigid schedule, but lately it was all she could do to remain focused. Even now, she realized, she was distracted. *Open it*, she thought. *Just do it*.

She gently twisted off the cap to the glass bottle and brought it to her nose, inhaling the flowery scent gently, not wanting to be overpowered. She closed her eyes and pictured fields of red and blue flowers, such as she'd never seen. She could almost feel the gentle breeze upon her skin, ruffling her hair as it blew past. She fought hard to imagine, to remember what her mother may have looked like. In time, an image began to form of a woman who bore a striking resemblance to Despara herself, but older, with long brown locks, elaborately curled, that seemed to float on the breeze. She focused on the woman's face, her bright eyes and the curve of a smile as it formed. She felt as if the vision could see her, here and now. That she was real. Despara knew instantly that the story told to her by the prisoners was true, that this was a memory of her birth mother.

She felt it in her gut; a sinking feeling as if she were falling a great distance. Her entire life had been a lie, her true family and life having been lost to her before she could even understand what such things were. Despara felt the room spin around her in a rush, its white walls blurring until, lost in a wave of memory and emotion, the Force Captain fell to the floor and wept until she fell into a fitful sleep.

■ ■ ■

Despara awoke in a field of flowers. She felt the breeze on her face, the crisp spring air making her tears feel cold against her flesh. She wiped them away. She stood up slowly and for the first time in her life felt the sensation of the grass underneath her bare feet. It felt slightly wet and surprisingly soft between her toes. The Force Captain looked down and found herself clothed in an ornate dress, pale green in color. She thought that perhaps it was something she would have worn had she remained on Tellus and embraced her royal heritage. "Adora," she heard a woman say from behind her. Despara turned quickly, startled at the sound of the voice. Before her stood the woman from her vision, the one she now knew was her mother. The woman gave her a glowing smile as she spoke once more. "Thank the gods," Marlena said, "that I have you before me once more, after so many years."

"Mother?" Despara asked.

"Yes," the woman answered. She spread her arms wide and Despara, surprised at the sudden surge of emotion she felt coursing through her, ran to Marlena and met her embrace. "Yes, Adora, it's really me."

"Adora," the girl said, feeling her body shudder as she spoke the word aloud. "Is that really who I am?"

"I swear it," Marlena answered, holding her even tighter. "It's been so long since I've held you, but I always had faith that you would be returned to me, that not even death would part us forever."

It was then that Despara remembered that Marlena was dead, several years past according to Randor. She pulled away without fully breaking the embrace, her face flush and wet with newly fallen tears. "But how?"

"The Everdream," Marlena said. "The afterlife is much more like what comes before it than you would ever expect. Eternians hold fast to the belief that dreams hold power, a connection to our ancestors that cannot be broken. I can't tell you how happy I am that such a thing could be true, that the connection between us thrives, despite our being strangers to each other. I have waited so very long for this moment, when I could hold my daughter in my arms once again." She slowly let go and Despara stepped back, looking closer at her surroundings. The fields seemed to stretch on forever, rolling hills of green grasses that met the horizon. Glancing upward, she saw the sky, far purer and more beautiful than she had seen it on any planet she'd visited or invaded. It all seemed unreal, too good to be true. "Have no doubts, Adora," Marlena said, as if

reading her mind. “This is all very real, just a different reality than what you are used to.”

“But how can I be here?” she asked. “I’ve dreamt before, but it was never like this, not so,” she paused, searching for the word, “real.”

“All Eternians can communicate with those they hold dear through the Everdream, but only when it reaches out to them,” her mother explained. “I sought you out. I had thought you were lost to me, despite my hopes, but recently I felt a flicker of you. It came and went and each time it would sputter out before I could latch onto it, but its existence reinvigorated my faith in finding you. Tonight, when you smelled that perfume again, it flared like a forest fire. I couldn’t truly find you until, somehow, you found yourself.”

“Actually, the perfume,” Despara said, “helped me find you. It was only then that I believed.”

“The perfume definitely helped tremendously. But even then, I still required the help of an old friend to bring you here, one who has been trying to pierce Hordak’s magic and find you herself for some time now. She was able to help me discover your father’s location and from there, we found you. It still took your believing the truth to reveal yourself fully, for us to be able to bring you here, but at least we had an idea of where to look. It was from that point that she focused on trying to help you remember.”

“Who?” Despara asked. “You say she’s a friend?”

“Yes,” Marlena answered. “She’s here with us now. Look.”

She pointed behind Despara. The girl turned and saw the silhouette of a woman making her way toward them, descending from a nearby hill. She was backlit by the bright sun, though her shape was immediately familiar to Despara as the woman from her dream, the one who had been calling to her, whispering her true name. Upon reaching Despara, she saw the woman in detail for the first time. She had long silver hair and wore a flowing white gown with a silver breastplate which was adorned in ornate symbols that Despara did not recognize. Above the woman’s smiling face was a feathered headdress, cascading and beautiful. Despara turned to speak to her mother once more, but Marlena was gone. “Do not fear,” the new arrival said in a soft voice, “you will see her again.”

“I know you,” Despara said, turning back to the new arrival. “I’ve seen you before, in my dreams. Who are you?”

The woman's smile broadened at hearing that she had managed to help Despara pierce the veil of Hordak's dream-blocking spell, that the girl had seen her before. "My name is Teela 'Na, but for many years I was known as the Sorceress of Grayskull on Tellus, your home world."

"You've been trying to help me learn the truth, but why?" Despara asked. After everything that's happened, she couldn't help but feel suspicious of this newcomer. "Who are you to me?"

"I am a guide," the woman answered, "to help you find your true destiny, and I am a friend. Our families are very close, long bonded through trust and love."

"And what is my destiny?" she asked. "Is fate not what we make it?"

"Yes," the Sorceress answered, "and no. Our destiny, our final fate, is chosen for us long before we are given life. However, there are certain choices we can make, touchstones along the way that can either take us closer to our destiny, or further down a dark path of ruin, never to fulfill the goal that fate has chosen for us. You will come upon one of these touchstones very soon, Adora, and the fate of all that exists will depend on your answer. You will have to decide: whose daughter were you truly born to be? Hordak's or Randor's?"

"What choice should I make, then?" Despara asked.

"That is only for you to decide," the Sorceress answered, "but remember that destiny is seldom achieved by taking the path of ease."

"You can't tell me any more than that?" Despara asked, slightly irritated.

"I can only help you choose, Adora. I cannot choose for you. You must follow what is in your heart."

"My heart," Despara muttered. *I wouldn't even know how*, she thought. *What good is a dream guide if she refuses to actually guide you?* "I don't understand."

"You will when the time comes, but at this moment, our time is fleeting," the Sorceress said, a sense of urgency creeping into her voice's normally calm cadence. "I must tell you one more thing before we part ways."

"What is it?" Despara asked.

"You must know that your brother Adam is there, with you on Etheria. He has come to free your father from Hordak's clutches. You can either help him

accomplish this or not, but either choice you make will result in death.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a choice then does it?” she asked.

“All I know is that one warrior will sacrifice their life for that of another. Who it is that will die is uncertain. Your touchstone, your decision about who you will become, what life you will choose to lead, that choice will be what decides their fates.”

“But how will I know what choice to make?” Despara pleaded. “Which decision will cause which outcome?” It was then that she realized she had awakened, the question asked of an empty room. After several unsettled minutes spent in deep thought, Despara stood up and walked to the mirror that hung in her washroom. Over the past several months, she had often gazed deep into her own reflection and wondered who she truly was. It seemed she now had an answer. “Adora,” she said aloud. The word sounded odd and new, but not altogether unwelcoming. “Despara.” While the name given to her by Hordak sounded familiar and comfortable, there was a sense of emptiness behind it. Something about it now just felt off, as if it were a name that had never truly been hers.

16.

DUNCAN'S SEARCH

Duncan grunted in discomfort as he clasped the last piece of his mechanical armor into place. Thanks to the peace that he had enjoyed on the rejuvenated planet, it had been some time since he'd worn it and he noted that it was feeling a bit snug. Still Eternia's Man-At-Arms, a position he'd held for more years than the current king had been alive, Duncan had recently begun considering retirement. Even Duncan, proud warrior that he was, had to admit that he wasn't getting any younger. He didn't move like he used to and a lifetime of battle had begun to catch up with him as modern day aches and pains proved to be painful reminders of old injuries he'd long forgotten, and they were many. He pushed the thought away as he took in the sight of his reflection in a full-length mirror that hung on the wall of his quarters. With his highly advanced armor on, he still cut an imposing figure and hoped that, if it came to it, that that would be enough. The truth was that he wasn't sure he could survive many more battles. He knew that his mission was simple, but he was well aware that even the simplest of missions could go awry without a moment's notice. That, as it turned out, was exactly what he feared had happened with Adam's.

His son-in-law Adam, the King of Eternia, had now been gone for too long. Duncan tried to write it off. He knew Adam was on a mission of his own, but he

should have already returned. Duncan was worried about Adam and, even if she didn't admit it, he knew that his daughter Teela, Adam's wife, was as well. Adam had set out on a quest to find a magic-user in an effort to learn if his dreams of his father Randor, Duncan's oldest friend, had more to them. Randor had been lost to the dimension of Despondos a year before, and Adam was convinced that his father still lived and was now in grave danger.

Duncan didn't know what he thought. He hadn't witnessed Randor's disappearance for he'd been near death at the time, but he knew that Randor's sacrifice had saved them all. Tellus was now in a state of balance once more, and free of Skeletor, who had turned out to in fact be Randor's older brother Keldor, long thought lost. In many ways he was, and Duncan still felt a surge of anger rise at the thought of Keldor's betrayal. Regardless, Adam's mission should not have taken more than a few days, and it had now been weeks since he'd left the kingdom in disguise to set upon his secret task. Several of the other high-ranking members of Adam's court had been asking about him and Duncan had finally had to relent and admit that the king was no longer within Eternia. He didn't divulge the reason for his leaving, other than he was on a personal quest, but the people close to him had begun to feel more and more uneasy regarding his prolonged absence.

Teela had spoken to Adam through the communicator Duncan had given him, but only once. He'd been sitting on the steps of an old temple, she'd told him, but that he had given up and was going to head to Stone Mountain that next morning. They had an old friend who lived there named Malik, referred to by many as "The Wizard of Stone Mountain," whom Adam should have headed to see. Something, however, must have happened. Stone Mountain was not far from Eternia and if that indeed was where Adam had gone, there was no reason that he shouldn't have returned by now. That was what Duncan was about to find out. He was tired of waiting and needed some answers. Duncan's first grandchild was due soon and Adam would never miss such an occasion. Something had to have gone wrong. He was sure of it.



Duncan climbed gingerly into his personal Wind Raider. It had been tweaked and outfitted with a more powerful engine than the standard version and

he wanted to get to Stone Mountain and back as quickly as possible. He hadn't told Teela that he was going and he didn't want her to worry about him, too. She had enough on her mind as it was. He eased the throttle forward and flew nearly vertically out of the royal hangar. Once he'd cleared the city walls, he settled the Wind Raider down into hover-mode. The closer it was to the ground, the faster it moved.

It didn't take him long to reach Stone Mountain and he soon landed near the rather nondescript cabin that Malik called home. Around the same age as his daughter, Teela, Malik had once fancied her, though that was many years ago. Duncan had always had a soft spot for Malik, although the wizard was sometimes misguided in his efforts to do good. Still, those days were long behind them now and Malik had done well for himself, having a wife and a child of his own. They could have lived in a nicer home than what they had, but humility was one of Malik's strong suits. It hadn't always been, but Malik was a good man and his cabin and his family were all he needed. He knew that Malik would have been more than happy to help Adam, but Duncan had a gut feeling that Adam had never made it this far.

Duncan climbed out of the Wind Raider and called out to his old friend. "Malik! Are you home?"

The door to the cabin opened with a pronounced squeak, caused by an old and rusting hinge, and the wizard stepped out with a broad smile. "By the gods, if it isn't the Eternian Man-At-Arms himself!"

"I don't know for how much longer, friend, these bones are starting to creak as loudly as your door," Duncan replied with a laugh.

"Judging by your attire, though, I feel that this isn't just a friendly visit," Malik said.

Duncan nodded. "I'm afraid you're right. I'm actually looking for Adam. Has he passed this way?"

"I'm afraid not, old friend," the wizard answered. "I haven't seen Adam since his wedding."

Duncan signed audibly. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"Why? Did he say something about stopping by?"

"In a way, yes. He set out to find a magic user to help him with..." he paused, not wanting to reveal Adam's plan and worry his friend, "well, let's just

say it was a private matter.”

“Well, he hasn’t been here, I can tell you that with certainty. When did he leave Eternia?” Malik asked.

“A few weeks back,” Duncan answered.

The wizard’s eyes widened. “Oh, I see. Do you have any idea who else he may have sought out then?”

Duncan nodded. “I do, and if I’m right, I’m not too happy about it. If true, it makes all the more sense why he neglected to tell me.”

“Well then I’ll let you go,” Malik said, “but please, if you need me, don’t hesitate to ask. I owe Adam and Eternia much.”

“And I appreciate it, Malik but where I’m going, science will be of more aid to me than magic.” He reached out his hand and shook his friend’s vigorously. “I will merely ask that you keep Adam in your thoughts.”

“I will, of course,” the man said as they let go. “If I hear anything you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thank you, my friend.” He turned to walk away before stopping. “If Teela inquires about this, don’t tell her I was here unless you have to. I’d rather not worry her. She has enough on her plate with the baby.”

“Yes, of course. I heard. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. Hopefully all of my worries are for nothing and we can all celebrate the day the prince is born together,” Duncan replied.

“Of course,” Malik said, nodding. “Good journey, Duncan. May the gods protect you and your family.”

“And you and yours. Until we meet again.” With that, Duncan made his way back to his Wind Raider and left, this time heading east, to where he felt Adam must have sent that communication from. He did indeed have an idea of where Adam had gone instead, and if he hadn’t made it to Malik safely, then he also knew who was to blame.



It was nearly dusk before Duncan approached the ruins of Zalesia. He'd planned to be home long before now, but that was out of his control at this point. Apart from Adam and Teela, Duncan was the only other person who had read Evil-Lyn's journal. The same journal that Randor had obsessed over before his disappearance. The same journal that had revealed the origins of Skeletor and Evil-Lyn both. He knew now that the journal was not a lie or a manipulation. At first Duncan had thought it a ruse to lure Randor into a trap, but Skeletor had indeed once been their ally Keldor, Randor's elder half-brother. Despite this, Duncan still didn't feel safe trusting that witch Evil-Lyn. Perhaps Adam had, he reasoned, and Duncan was afraid that that could have been his son-in-law's downfall.

Adam always looked for the best in people, was always convinced that bad folks could change their ways. Duncan knew better. He had seen evil up close and personal for far too many years and knew what it was capable of. Evil-Lyn had delivered the journal, but she only did something if it benefited her. With Skeletor now gone from Tellus, banished to Despondos along with Randor, Duncan felt that she may have gotten exactly what she wanted: freedom from her life of servitude to that monster. But Duncan also knew that she was a monster in her own right and, now freed from the shackles of Skeletor, that she was more dangerous than ever.

As Duncan ascended the sandy steps of the Temple of Zalesia, he pulled down his helmet's visor. He didn't know if she was still here, but if she was, her magic would not be able to hide her. Duncan was a man of science, and he trusted it over her sorcery any day. He entered the temple slowly, gazing intently at his surroundings. The large marble columns were covered with dust and sand. Large webs connected them, creating an almost silken tapestry. To the untrained eye, it would appear as if no one had set foot in here in ages. With the aid of his armor's enhancements, Duncan knew better. He could make out the faint markings of footprints, both human and animal, warmer than their surrounding marble tiles by several degrees. Someone had indeed been here, and very recently. The human footprints were small, most likely female, and Duncan knew in his gut that they belonged to her, to Evil-Lyn.

Making his way deeper into the temple, he turned down a large corridor and lightened his steps and he got closer to wherever she was hiding. The further he followed the footprints, the warmer their residual temperature became. He knew he was getting close. Around one hundred paces further, they stopped abruptly in front of an otherwise nondescript wall. Using his visor's enhanced

vision, he picked up on a handprint, placed carefully upon a specific brick in the wall. Upon placing his own hand against it, the wall groaned and slid to the side. He smiled, causing his mustache to tickle the underside of his nose. *Found you*, he thought. He stepped in carefully, but was quickly blasted back into the hallway by a powerful bolt of lightning, nearly frying his armor's circuits.

"What are you doing in my home?" a female voice asked. He didn't need to see who it was to recognize it.

"Just visiting," he said as he rolled into a crouching position and fired at her with his wrist-mounted blaster.

Evelyn merely raised her hand and absorbed the blast with her palm. "Cute," she said. "Do you always shoot at the people you visit?"

He scoffed. "You started this."

She signed in response. "It made sense to strike first. You came looking for a fight, Man-At-Arms. I could sense it. I can practically smell the anticipation of it coming off of you."

"Really?" he asked. "What about this?" He reached to his belt and pulled a gas pellet from it, casting it forcefully in her direction.

Evelyn once again raised her hand and the object hovered in the air in front of her. With a flick of her wrist, it shot past Duncan and erupted at his rear, though far down the hallway where it would not affect either one of them. "Are you about done?" she asked.

Duncan grunted as he stood upright once more. "I suppose so. What have you done with Adam?" he demanded.

She shot him a curious look. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"I know he came here," he answered. "That he sought you out. I want to know what has happened to him."

She nodded. "He did come here. You're right. And he did so in a much friendlier manner than you, I might add."

"Excuse me for not trusting someone who served Skeletor for more years than that boy has been alive."

"That's old news," she said. "Adam understood this. He came to me for help and I gave it to him."

“What kind of help?” Duncan asked sternly.

“He was looking for his father, your dear old friend Randor,” she answered. “I helped him find him. The problem is that Randor is imprisoned by The Horde on a world called Etheria. I helped Adam liberate the Havok Staff so that he could go there and free him. He left some time ago.”

“He what?!” Duncan shouted. “And you let him go?”

She nodded. “He’s an adult, Duncan. He can do as he pleases. For what it’s worth, I tried to talk him out of it.”

“I see you did a fine job,” he retorted.

“Your king is not my responsibility, Man-At-Arms. I have enough to deal with here,” she said. “Of course, being a man of science, as you so often proclaim, you wouldn’t understand. With the planet back in balance, Zalesia is now the primary focal point of its magic. It is my job to keep watch over it.”

“Then where is this planet called Etheria located?” he asked.

“Far out of your reach, I’m afraid,” she answered. “Your precious science will be of little aid to you in finding him. There’s nothing you can do but hope he is successful and wait for him to return with his father.”

Duncan’s brow furrowed in anger. “You stupid, scheming witch. You sent him on this quest. Did you not realize that you were sending him to his death? Did you not think that there would be consequences?”

Electricity crackled around Evelyn as she seethed. “Consequences? You think I wouldn’t know that there could be consequences? You truly are a fool if you think that I just let him leave like it was nothing. I am well aware that if Randor has been pulled from Despondos that Skeletor likely was as well, or have you failed to think of that? It’s far more likely that Skeletor was Hordak’s intended target. Randor would have just been a bonus. With Adam taking the Havok Staff to Etheria to free his father, do you honestly think for one moment that I don’t realize that Skeletor could get his favorite weapon back and escape? With his identity revealed, his secret exposed, who do you think our old friend would target first, huh? Me, you idiot. It is true that I owed Randor and Adam for ridding Tellus of Skeletor, but by helping them, I have put myself at grave risk.”

“Don’t play the martyr card just yet,” Duncan responded angrily, “for if Adam doesn’t return before the birth of his son, you can rest assured that Skeletor won’t be the only one looking for you.”

“Because your weapons were so effective the first time?” she asked with a sneer.

Duncan huffed as he turned his back to her. He began walking away before calling back over his shoulder. “It won’t just be me next time, Evil-Lyn. Next time, I’ll bring the entire Eternian army down on your head.”

Despite her attempt at reformation, Evelyn felt herself having to suppress the urge to kill him. She sighed lightly to herself. It didn’t matter. If Duncan only knew the danger that Skeletor would pose on this rejuvenated planet, the power that the skull-faced sorcerer would possess, the Eternian Man-At-Arms wouldn’t be so concerned with her.

17.

THE COSMIC KEY

The sound of Randor's cell door opening awoke him from a light sleep. He was startled to see Despara walked briskly into the cell and he sat up quickly in response. "I saw my mother," she said, "In a dream."

He wiped the sleep from his eyes, but found himself awakening quickly, his senses alert. "She visited you?"

"I suppose so," she replied. "There was another, a Sorceress. I have confirmed that what you and Skeletor have told me is true," she said simply. "I am your daughter."

"Thank the Goddess," he exclaimed. "I've longed for the day that you would learn—"

"I haven't finished," she interrupted. "Just because it's the truth does not make it what I want."

"What is it you want, then?" he asked. "To serve Hordak forever?"

"I do not yet know," she answered. "I have a choice to make, and soon,

but I want you to understand that it is my choice and no one else's."

"Of course," he replied. "I would never pressure you into a decision." She quickly turned to leave. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"As I told you before, you are not the only one I seek answers from," she said. "It's about time I started asking the right people."

"Be careful."

"I am always careful." Without another word, she turned and left, leaving Randor alone once more, but with considerably more hope than he'd had previously. He couldn't help but feel a smile grow as he caught the familiar scent of Summer Fire perfume that she left behind.



Skeletor was sitting in meditation, his head hung low and nearly hidden within his hood, when Despara walked into his cell. "We have to stop meeting like this," he said calmly without looking up. "People will think you're conspiring with me."

"Perhaps I have been," she replied. "I'm tired of being toyed with, Skeletor. You've told me the truth, I know this now, but what do you hope to gain from telling me? You don't do anything without a reason."

"True," he said matter-of-factly, "but my reasons are my own."

"You keep saying that. Why?" she asked.

He raised his head slowly, meeting her eyes with the empty sockets that his own used to call home. "Because it remains true." He stood up to his full height, standing nearly a head taller than the Force Captain, his frame twice as wide. "I would like for you to tell me more about the song that Shadow Weaver used to sing to you as a child."

"What in the worlds does that have to do with anything?" Despara asked.

"It may have everything to do with everything," he said. "Why do you continue to come to me if not to talk?"

She remained silent for a long moment before answering. "I relate to you," she admitted. "I feel we have a connection, although I don't claim to understand it."

"Of course we do," he responded. "I've told you that before. I don't suppose Randor has explained it to you yet?"

"He's made no mention of such a thing," she answered. "All he's said of you is that you are a skilled liar and that I shouldn't trust you."

"I figured as much," he said. "Our family troubles run deep."

"Family troubles?" she echoed.

He nodded. "Indeed. Randor, my dear, is my brother."

"Which would make you my uncle," she said.

"Yes, it would."

"But I don't understand," she continued. "You're not human."

"And neither are you, to all outside appearances," he indicated her lifelike mask, "but we both know better, don't we? Appearances can be deceiving."

"Your skin?" she asked, referring to its strange hue.

"I'm of mixed heritage: Eternian and a blue-skinned race known as the Gar."

"And," she hesitated, "your face?"

His jaw lowered slightly in a mock-smile. "An old curse; for my hubris."

"If the skull is a curse, then it's magic," she said. "How is it possible that it remains so here in the Fright Zone?"

He'd put some thought into that, himself. "I'm not actually sure," he admitted. "My theory is that magic itself is not blocked here, but rather my ability to access it."

"And you're telling me the truth about this?" she asked.

"I have no reason not to. You're my niece, after all," he laughed.

Were they really related? She didn't see why not. After all of the recent revelations as to her origins, nothing seemed to be impossible. "Why then? Why

are you telling me this only now?"

His voice suddenly took on a more serious tone. "Because if you are going to get the idea in your head to free Randor, and you will, I expect you to release me as well."

"Why should I do that?" she asked.

"It was I who brought you together, was it not?"

"Yes," she answered, "but I don't yet know whether I think of that as a gift or not." She reflected for a moment before continuing. "It's not easy being told your entire life is a lie, Skeletor. I could simply resent you, you know."

"But you don't," he said, not as a question, but a statement of fact.

"I don't yet know what I feel," she replied.

"We have much in common, Despara," Skeletor said in a soothing tone. "I had my life taken away from me at an early age as well. This skull, this curse, is not who I truly am, not what I was born to be. If my imprisonment here has been anything, it has been a reminder of that. I have had plenty of time to think, after all. I remember now, for the first time in many years, that I am destined to be more than this. I was mad for a time, but I now play at madness because it is what is expected of me. In reality, my mind is clearer than it has ever been, and that is my greatest secret. No one can understand your frustration more than I can, Despara. We both wear masks that hide our true selves. At least you have the luxury of removing yours." The sorcerer appeared to be upset, but he shrugged it off quickly, trying to bring her back once again to his initial question. "Never mind all of that," he said. "I did make a request of you earlier. I want to hear more about that song."

"I don't understand why," she said.

"If I'm correct in my assumption, I promise to explain my interest," Skeletor replied.

"Fine," she said, sitting down as she spoke. "It's always seemed nonsensical, to be honest. Something about stars and planets, and the dawn of time."

Skeletor stared intently as she sang the short and simple song. She was right, it made little sense, at least when you thought of it as being a story told in spoken word. Skeletor, however, knew better. The trick was not to listen to the words themselves, but the tune they made, the sequence of notes they formed.

The words meant nothing, but the music behind them was indeed important. “Interesting,” he said quietly. “He’s progressed further than I ever thought he could.”

“So you know it?” she asked.

“The song? No,” he answered. “The words are meaningless. But I recognize the tune.”

She cocked her head slightly. “Does it mean something to you?”

“Oh yes,” he said solemnly. “It means a great deal to me.”

Despara thought for a long moment. “There is something else I can tell you. Something odd.”

“Go on.”

“I recently undertook a mission for my father—” she stumbled, embarrassed at her mistake. “For Hordak. I was sent to the planet Elesian to collect something for him. I had originally thought it was an artifact, a Horde ship carved into a stone wall, but—”

“Elesian?” he interrupted. “That’s farther away than you could ever realize. It would have taken you months to get there, even with a hyperlight drive.”

“On the contrary, I made the trip in seconds,” she replied.

Skeletor’s eyes lit up a fiery red. “The Key,” he said, almost under his breath.

“The what?” she asked.

“How did you get there?” he asked hurriedly. “What kind of ship did you use?”

“Just a simple short-range fighter,” she answered, “but Shadow Weaver said that Hordak had wired a device into its guidance system. I have no idea what it was, but when I used it, it played a series of tones. When it finished, a wormhole of some sort opened up. It pulled me through it and suddenly I was at my destination, only seconds later.”

Skeletor stood up quickly and began to pace the floor of his cell. “Yes, yes, it all makes sense now. What did you bring back from Elesian? You said it was not the artifact that you had thought it was. What was it then? Tell me.”

She was slightly taken aback by his sudden sense of urgency. “It was not an artifact at all, as I have said, but rather another tone, one single note of music.” She cocked her head to the side slightly and gazed at him with a puzzled expression. “What does it mean? I feel you know something that you’re not telling me.”

“Be patient, child,” he commanded. “I’m still working it out for myself. In your time with The Horde, the planets you’ve invaded,” he paused, “how did you arrive at their locations?”

“Just a standard hyperlight drive,” she answered. “Nothing fancy. Nothing like what I used to get to Elesian, if that’s what you mean. Why?”

He stopped pacing and looked her straight in the eye. “What you used to retrieve that tone is an invention called the Cosmic Key.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” she said.

He nodded knowingly. “Obviously, Hordak has continued keeping it a closely guarded secret. During my time with The Horde, Hordak, Shadow Weaver and I were the only ones that knew of its existence.”

“Did Hordak invent it?” Despara asked. “If so, why not make a thousand more? Why not wire them into all of our ships?”

“No,” Skeletor said. “It was invented by a Thenurian locksmith and inventor named Gwildor. After he refused to serve your master, he was placed in a cell on one of the Horde’s many conquered worlds. I’m sure he’s long dead by now. Other than the Cosmic Key Hordak possesses, there was once a prototype, but I’m unsure as to its fate.”

“But what is it, exactly?” she asked.

“The perfect mixture of science and magic,” he explained. “It looks more like a musical instrument than a traditional key or weapon. When operated, the Key opens a portal that can take you anywhere, provided you know the correct sequence of tones.”

“Even as far as one hundred galaxies?” Despara asked, thinking of Elesian’s distance from where they now stood.

“It could take you anywhere in a thousand galaxies,” Skeletor answered excitedly, “but knowing the correct sequence is vital. Enter in the wrong sequence and you could find yourself in the middle of a sun or planet, or lost to the cold of space. In fact, it was the key that allowed The Horde to invade Tellus

and steal you away. The Eternians never saw your master coming.”

“Then the series of tones that make up the song...” she trailed off.

“They are part of a sequence that Hordak has been trying to assemble since before my time,” he answered.

“But where would they take him?” she asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” he admitted, “but I have a feeling it’s not just a matter of ‘where,’ but ‘when.’”

“What do you mean?”

“The manipulation of time is one of the oldest stories of magic, a myth about a man who fixed his life’s mistakes by going back and changing his actions. It’s never been done,” Skeletor explained, “but Hordak seemed to think that he could manipulate the Key in such a way that he could achieve the same end. He believed that he could use it to travel through time, to either the past or future.”

“Why would he want to do that?” she asked. “What mistakes would he want to undo?”

Skeletor stayed silent for a long moment. “Now is not the time to explain. What matters is that we need to steal the Cosmic Key.”

“What for?”

“To escape,” he answered. “If you decide to free Randor, using the Cosmic Key to send him back to Tellus is your best option for survival.”

“But even if I did want to free him, I would have no idea how to use the Key,” she argued.

Skeletor’s jaw lowered slightly in a mock-smile. “And that, my dear, is why you will need to take me with you.” Although Hordak was his enemy, Skeletor had learned many useful things throughout the years he had spent as his apprentice, not the least of which was to never limit your options to just one variable. With Catra working to disable Hordak’s magic-blocking spell and now Despara’s telling him of the Cosmic Key’s continued existence, Skeletor was beginning to have enough options for escape to make him finally feel that it was inevitable. He was maneuvering both women like pieces on a dwylek game board and he enjoyed it. Still, time was of the essence. Now that he knew Hordak’s plans were nearing their culmination, Skeletor would have to act fast. If

he was correct, then the end of the universe was nearer than the skull-faced sorcerer was comfortable with.

18.

IN HORDAK'S IMAGE

Hordak walked purposefully through his personal library, located deep within the bowels of the Fright Zone's main tower. Despara had done well, having brought him the final tone that he needed. He now knew his destination. It was ironic in a way that his final victory would take place on a planet that he had once dismissed, indeed the very planet upon which his adopted daughter had been born. Myth and legend had long said that Tellus was the center of the universe, the nucleus from which all life sprang. Hordak had always believed it to simply be the hubris of the planet's inhabitants. Nearly every planet had legends about how it was the first, or the center of the universe. There was nothing unique about Tellus's claims. It just happened to be that in this one instance the legends were true.

The nightmarish Horde leader approached a particular rack of books and scrolls, seeking out a very specific tome. It had been some time since he'd read about the prophecy of the Twins of Grayskull. The bloodline of King Grayskull ran strong with magic. Ages ago, Hordak had fought King Grayskull himself, who had the rare distinction of being the only one to have ever defeated the nearly invincible lord of The Horde. It had taken centuries for Hordak to free himself from the dimension of Despondos, where Grayskull had imprisoned him. He was

at least thankful that he had dealt Grayskull a killing blow before his banishment. It had made the wait at least slightly more bearable. However, Grayskull's wife Veena had been with child at the time of her husband's death, and Grayskull's bloodline lived on. Its strength in magic was due in large part to Veena, who became the very first Sorceress of Grayskull, the mystical guardian of her husband's castle after his death. Now, ages later, Grayskull's bloodline would serve Hordak, giving him his ultimate victory. Evil-Lyn may have been the one to eventually free Hordak from his imprisonment, but it was not lost on him at the time that her companion Keldor was of Grayskull's bloodline. Far removed and watered down no doubt, but even still, Keldor had shown much promise.

Keldor, however, had turned out to be a disappointment, far too absorbed in himself to ever truly acknowledge Hordak as his master. More than that, the powerful magical bloodline that Keldor inherited from his mother had in fact tainted his ties to Grayskull's. Although the combination of lines made Keldor powerful, his blood would never be pure enough for Hordak's purposes. When Keldor became Skeletor, the man gained tremendous power, but it made him even more unstable as an ally. Hordak kept Skeletor near, in order to keep a watchful eye on him, until the Horde leader had secured Grayskull's infant descendant, then called Adora, and took her as his own. As soon as he knew that he could not be stopped from taking the child, Hordak cast Skeletor and his wench Evil-Lyn aside. If anything, he had been far too merciful to his former apprentices. He had allowed them his trust and it had made him weak. It was a mistake he would not repeat. He pushed the memory aside. In hindsight, he should have just eliminated them. Hordak knew early on in Keldor's service that he would one day have to find a replacement, another of Grayskull's line, and at a much younger age, a malleable age, allowing the child to be indoctrinated early and taught true obedience. He had long been aware of the prophecy of the twins, and had been more than willing to bide his time, waiting for them to be born. Everything comes to he who waits, and Hordak had waited so very long for that moment. It was just part of the game. One had to be patient enough for all of the pieces to align on the board in the proper sequence. Only then could they take full advantage of them.

Pulling the book from the shelf, the alien warlord smiled to himself. It was the only copy of the ancient tome left in existence, the prophecy of the twins largely lost to time, known only to a select few. Hordak had known almost immediately which child to take. He could feel the darkness within her. Over time, Despara had been reared by himself and Shadow Weaver to be the perfect weapon, an obedient thrall, without her even realizing it. The girl barely had a mind of her own, and any chance of her betraying him was nonexistent. She did

not even understand the concept. Hordak was her father for all intents and purposes. He knew she could never dream of turning on him, much unlike her uncle, who dreamt of it from the moment he'd pledged himself to the Horde leader.

"Ah, here it is," Hordak said aloud as he flipped the ancient book of prophecy open to the page he sought. An artist's rendering of King Grayskull graced its pages, causing Hordak to chuckle to himself upon seeing the man again, Grayskull's long blond locks draped over wide and powerful shoulders. His face bore a hard, stony expression. It was the face of a warrior king, a man who had had to fight for everything he called his own, a man who had earned his right to a crown in battle. It was the face of a worthy opponent. "If only you were here, my old foe, to see your own bloodline serving me, handing me the universe on a silver platter. Finally, countless years later, I will have my revenge, and I couldn't have done it without you. Blood is a vital component of any powerful spell. The immensely powerful blood of your own line, Grayskull, combined with the power of the Cosmic Key, will finally allow me to become the master of the universe. The fact that I was able to pluck Randor from Despondos so simply proves that it is my destiny. I have already won. It is only a matter of time and you, old ghost, are long gone. There is no way that you can stop me this time."

As a result of Despara's completed mission, Hordak now knew the destination of his journey, but he still had to learn the correct temporal coordinates needed to get there at the appropriate time. Setting the book of prophecy aside, he shifted his attention to an old and withered scroll. Once unrolled, it unveiled a broad timeline of the universe's history, but too broad for his purposes. He needed the specific moment. He'd spent days searching within his chambers, but none of the books or scrolls located there had contained the information he sought. He would have to continue his search.

■ ■ ■

The place where Shadow Weaver spent most of her days, Horror Hall was her home and her study, her place to rest and the laboratory that housed her arcane experiments. The passageways within it were draped in shadow as they always were, for located within a mountain just south of the Fright Zone, it consisted primarily of a series of caves and tunnels. Finding the witch's inner

sanctum was a difficult enough task alone, and even when one arrived within its confines, they were not yet out of danger. In fact, to be standing in Shadow Weaver's chambers usually meant that you were at grave risk, sure to be a victim of her dark magic. One of the benefits of being Shadow Weaver's daughter was that Despara had nothing to fear here.

The Force Captain smiled, her cybernetic mask mimicking the expression. Raised within this very structure from an early age, Despara knew the twisted path to her mother's chambers well, the darkness of the tunnels familiar and inviting. While Hordak's tower within the Fright Zone was cold and lacking decor, Horror Hall was nothing if not imbued with her adoptive mother's personality. To most others, that would be an intimidating and even terrifying thing. To Despara, it was simply home. Her years spent within Hordak's tower had not driven her affinity for this place from her. While it may have been dark and twisted, like so many things Despara had been surrounded by in her youth, she did not see it as such. It was simply what she knew.

It had been some time since she'd been here. Her duties as Force Captain kept her busy. Despite recent revelations, Despara felt happy to be home, such as it was. Her decision to come here had not been a frivolous one, but rather found through much meditation and contemplation. Shadow Weaver, while not fitting the typical mold of a loving mother, loved Despara nonetheless. The girl was sure of this. She knew it in her heart. Speaking to both Skeletor and her birth father had told her much, but not everything, and there was no denying that they each had their own reasons for sharing her true origins with her. Skeletor wanted to be free, that much was obvious. He most likely had other interests in her as well, but they were unknown to her at the moment. Randor wanted his daughter back. Maybe that was enough for him. Despara had to wonder, however, whether there was anything left of Adora within her to offer him, and more importantly, whether she wanted there to be. Did she really want to give up her identity, false or not? She needed more than what those two men were after, and more than what a dream of her birth mother and the Sorceress of a place called Grayskull could offer. She needed to speak with her real mother, the mother she'd known all her life.

Did she want to be Adora? Princess of a world she had no emotional connection to? Or would she rather continue to be Despara, and carry on with her life as if none of these recent revelations were true? She didn't have an answer to that question yet. Discussing her origins with Shadow Weaver would help her find it. She'd always known that she was different, that Shadow Weaver and Hordak had chosen her from countless children to be their daughter. It was about time she started asking some questions in order to learn why. Why her?

Things were coming to a head, and soon. If what the Sorceress had mentioned about touchstones was true, that moments come in one's life that dictate the path they take, Despara knew that she was upon one now. She had to make her choice soon. According to the woman from her dream, her brother was here on Etheria. If this were true, there was reason enough to believe that he would attempt his rescue of Randor soon. Within two day's time was the yearly Tribute. It seemed the unlikeliest of times for one to attack, as the Fright Zone would be under heavy guard, but if this "Adam" had anything in common with her, that is the time he would do it. No one would expect it. It was certainly the time she would choose were she in his position.

As she turned the final corner on the way to her mother's laboratory, Despara mentally prepared herself for what was about to transpire. It had been one thing to hear of her origins from two prisoners and a woman from a dream. It would be altogether different to hear it from the lips of her own mother, the woman who had raised her, kept her fed, and trained her to be what she was. Despara wanted to know if all of this was the truth. If she was Randor's daughter as had been claimed, only Shadow Weaver could truly make her believe. Entering the cavernous room, she took it in. The floor, walls and ceiling were all natural formations of the cave. Moisture fell from above in random intervals, creating small dripping sounds that carried throughout the otherwise nearly silent lab. Various clear cylinders placed about the room housed creatures and beings from Shadow Weaver's experiments. The oddities were suspended in various types of bubbling liquids, not unlike aquariums. One of them, a large green head belonging to a species Despara was unfamiliar with, floated alone, having been severed from its body. The head blinked as she walked past, its still-living eyes tracking her movements. She wondered what it was thinking.

Despara found Shadow Weaver leaning over an ornate wooden table, engraved with ancient Etherian magical symbols. A book lay splayed out before her, charting the history of the universe. Despara considered that it could be related to her mother's own works, but the fervor with which she studied its pages suggested that it was instead something Hordak had requested. He was looking for something. That much Despara knew. She had brought him a piece of the answer, but it had not been enough for her to grasp what it was exactly that he was searching for. Skeletor seemed to know, but he only revealed information that he wanted to reveal; that served his purpose. Perhaps her mother would provide more luck on that front as well. Hearing her approach, her mother hissed as she spun around to meet her eyes. "Curses, Child, you are well aware that your silent step unsettles me."

Despara cracked a wry smile. "Apologies, Mother, but I was trained to be

silent, remember?”

The woman in red nodded. “Indeed you were. What brings you home? It’s been some time since you’ve seen fit to come here.”

“Yes, I was just thinking the same,” she responded. “Must there be a reason, or is a child not allowed to visit her mother simply because she chooses to?”

“You never do anything without reason, Despara. You take after your father in that respect.”

Despara gritted her teeth in preparation. “Which father? Hordak or Randor?”

If Shadow Weaver was surprised, it didn’t show. Her face was, as always, hidden within the darkness of her hood. “This day has been a long time coming,” she said simply.

“So it is true?” Despara asked.

“It is true that the Eternian is your birth father, yes, but he did not raise you. The Horde is your family, my dear, and always has been.” Despara glanced downward to the earthen floor, her mask suddenly feeling very heavy upon her head. As if feeling its weight herself, Shadow Weaver spoke once more. “Remove it. I wish to see my daughter’s true face.”

Releasing the mask’s clasps with a snapping sound, Despara removed it, revealing the human face beneath. She sat it down on a nearby table and leaned against it, her blonde hair falling into her eyes. “My name is Adora,” she said quietly, “or so I’m told.”

Shadow Weaver glided silently toward her, placing her icy hands upon Despara’s shoulders. The younger woman turned and looked her mother in the eyes. She wasn’t sure what it was she saw in them. Was it concern? Love? Perhaps even desperation, a fear of losing her? The Horde witch brushed the hair out of her daughter’s eyes. “You look unkempt.”

Despara couldn’t help but laugh softly. “You’ve been expecting this conversation, haven’t you?” she asked.

“Of course,” Shadow Weaver answered. “As I’ve said, it’s been a long time coming. It’s been some months now since the arrival of the prisoners, since Randor first saw you and spoke the words that spared his life.” She paused a moment before she continued, “I take it you’ve been speaking to him, then?”

“Not until recently,” Despara answered. “Besides that, he’s not even the one who told me.”

Shadow Weaver gave her a puzzled look. “Who then?”

“Skeletor,” she answered.

The older woman nodded. “Of course. He wants to be free, so he set you upon this course.”

“What does one have to do with the other?” Despara asked.

“Skeletor is no fool,” Shadow Weaver answered. “I know him well. He’s counting on your becoming attached to your birth father and that you’ll wish to free Randor before his death. Skeletor would, of course, expect to tag along.”

Despara nodded. Shadow Weaver was right, of course. Skeletor had already proposed just such a thing. It was then that something else her adoptive mother had said finally registered. “His death?” Despara asked suddenly. “What do you mean?”

“In due time,” her mother answered. “Regardless, you should not trust Skeletor. I don’t suppose he told you that he was involved in your abduction?”

Despara felt a chill run down her spine. Randor had made no secret of Skeletor’s involvement, but she hadn’t wanted to believe that it was true. Despite her best efforts, she had begun to feel a connection to Skeletor, a kinship. Must everyone lie to her? “No. He did not.”

“Oh, yes,” Shadow Weaver continued. “He betrayed his own kingdom to Hordak, allowing your master to spirit you away.”

“That’s not how he tells the tale,” she replied. “According to Skeletor, Hordak betrayed him and abandoned him there. He didn’t even know Hordak was after me until it was too late.”

Shadow Weaver’s head cocked to the side slightly. “I don’t like your seeming familiarity with that man. He is the lord of lies.”

“Many would say the same about Hordak,” Despara retorted.

“Is that what you would say about your father?” Shadow Weaver hissed.

“Apparently, yes,” she answered. “He has been lying to me my entire life, after all.”

“No, he gave you a life, my dear: a life as Despara, Force Captain of The Horde. He gave you the gift of being the only child of the universe’s great master, of being heir to his empire. Eternians are a patriarchal society. No throne awaited you back on Tellus, no real power, save as a figurehead. Hordak has given you all of these things. He chose you, above all others, to succeed him.”

Despara shook her head slowly with a dawning realization. “Hordak is thousands of years old, Mother, an immortal. The likelihood of my succeeding him is null. My being an heir to his throne is just as much a fantasy as everything else he’s told me.” The slap came without warning. As soon as it connected, Despara felt tears well in her eyes from the stinging pain. She blinked them back.

“How dare you question him, his will? He made you what you are!” her mother shouted.

“He used me as a cipher,” she countered. “I was as good as an empty vessel when he took me. He’s simply made me a reflection of him.”

“A reflection of glory!” Shadow Weaver exclaimed. “A reflection of power and might!”

“A reflection of evil?” Despara asked.

Shadow Weaver’s eyes narrowed within the darkness of her hood. “Evil is subjective, my daughter. One man’s villain is another’s hero. Once laden down with infighting and wars amongst their own people, he has brought order to his conquered worlds. Your home planet has no order. It has a long history of being at war with itself.”

“An evasive answer as always, Mother.”

Shadow Weaver backed away from her and returned to the ancient tome she had been studying when Despara had entered. “Why did you come here?” she hissed. “Is this simply some fit of teenage rebellion, or something more?” She turned back to face her daughter once again. “What is it you seek here? What do you want from me?”

Despara ran her fingers through her hair, slicking it back and away from her face in an effort to remain composed. “I simply wanted to hear the truth from your lips. And now I have.”

“You think you know everything?” the Horde witch asked. “You think you

know your purpose?”

“No!” Despara shouted. “That’s my entire point! I don’t even know who I am anymore! I once thought I had a destiny here, with The Horde, but now...” she trailed off. “I don’t even know why Hordak chose me. He’s never seen fit to tell me.”

“Then I shall. Has Hordak ever told you of King Grayskull?” Shadow Weaver asked.

Despara remembered now that the Sorceress from her dream claimed to be from Castle Grayskull, which was once King Grayskull’s home, the only being to have ever truly defeated Hordak. She was surprised she had not made the obvious connection before this moment. “Yes,” she answered, “but what does his old foe have to do with anything?”

“Grayskull’s bloodline is very powerful,” Shadow Weaver said quietly. “More powerful than you can imagine. You are of Grayskull, the man’s direct descendant.”

“So Hordak wanted me to wield as a weapon?” she asked. “Because of my connection to this King Grayskull?”

“No,” Shadow Weaver said as she shook her head. “He wanted a worthy apprentice, an heir, as I’ve told you countless times over your life. It remains true.”

“Why me, then? Why not my brother? Blazes, why not both of us?” Despara asked.

“The prophecy. ‘One would be born into the light while the other would fall to darkness.’ Hordak sensed the light within your brother, and to take him would have meant trouble. It went against the prophecy. If he took both of you, the prophecy couldn’t be fulfilled and each of you would have been just another child.”

“What did Hordak sense within me then? Darkness?” She paused, contemplating. “Weakness?”

“Opportunity.”

“For what? What is he up to?” Despara asked.

Shadow Weaver’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Our lord’s mission is divine. He needs the blood of a powerful line to complete the necessary spell to

achieve his goals. What better bloodline than that of Grayskull himself? What better victory could he have over his enemy?"

"And this is what he wanted me for?"

Shadow Weaver shook her head. "No. Originally it was why he took Keldor on as his apprentice, before he became Skeletor. He is your uncle, and is of course also of Grayskull's line."

"Then why didn't he just use Keldor's blood?"

"Besides the fact that Hordak did not yet have everything he needed, Keldor's mother, unrelated to you or Randor, was of a powerful line of Gar sorcerers, herself. While this imbued Keldor with great a potential for sorcery, it muddied his connection to Grayskull. He was impure, a mix of incompatible bloodlines."

"So Hordak chose me instead," Despara wagered.

"I told you no!" Shadow Weaver shouted. "He never intended to use you in this way. He knew he'd have other options someday. He is, if anything, patient. He certainly has the time to be. No, that honor belongs to Randor. When Hordak finds the proper time, he will use your father's blood to achieve his ultimate goal."

"And what is that?" Despara asked, genuinely curious. Hordak's ultimate goal was known to only himself and Shadow Weaver, and perhaps Skeletor.

"His final victory," her mother answered. "He already has the last set of coordinates needed to be in the right location for the spell. Thanks to you, I should add."

"The tone from Elesian," Despara remarked. "It was the final tone he needed to complete the sequence required for the Cosmic Key to take him there."

"Yes. I assume Skeletor told you of the Key's existence. You've already seen its power. It's not just about location, however." She spun and pointed to the book laid open on her table. "Hordak also needs to know the proper time. Once he has that, his journey can begin."

"And that's what you're helping him find."

"Yes. Once we discover it, Randor's blood will be the catalyst, allowing Hordak to use the Cosmic Key to travel back to where it all began."

“Where what all began?” Despara asked. “His defeat at the hands of King Grayskull? An effort to avoid his imprisonment in Despondos?”

“You think too small, Daughter. I mean where everything began: the dawn of all life. There he will use his magic to twist the very spark of creation and remake all of existence in his image. He will change the past, and it will ripple forward, changing our present. Everything will be his. Everything.”

“Making him a god in the process,” Despara replied.

“Not ‘a’ god, my dear, the god, the lord of all creation, with me at his right hand, and you as his heir.”

Again, a shiver ran down Despara’s back. This was madness. Hordak was insane and Shadow Weaver was no better. How could she go along with this? Could Shadow Weaver truly be that much of a slave to Hordak’s will? Would she sacrifice all of existence to see the Horde leader succeed? Who’s to say whether she or her mother would even exist when all was said and done? Could Hordak be trusted to fulfill his end of the bargain? “I don’t know if I can accept this,” she said.

“You must, my daughter, for it will be happening soon; sooner than you think.”

“And what of Randor?” Despara asked.

“He will die, of course,” Shadow Weaver answered. “The spell requires that he be completely drained, and it is Hordak’s will that you be the one to do it.”

“Me?” she asked, visibly shocked despite her best efforts to remain emotionally detached from her birth father. “Why?”

“A final test of your loyalty,” Shadow Weaver answered. “Your ultimate choice. Whose child will you choose to be?”

Her words so closely echoing the words of the Sorceress of Grayskull was eerie. Despara paced the room restlessly. *Madness*, she thought once more. *But what can I do?*

“I can sense your confusion,” Shadow Weaver said. “I understand, my child. It is a lot to take in. I had my own difficulties believing in his ultimate plan when I was first told of it, but over the decades I have seen it come together, each piece falling into place like some type of preordained game of dwylek. It will come to pass and when it does, you will want to be standing with him, as his daughter, for if not you will be beneath him, and he will crush you under his boot

like an insect.”

“I need time to think this through,” she said simply.

“Time is short, my daughter.”

“I know, Mother.”

Shadow Weaver returned to Despara and once again placed her cold hands upon her shoulders. “I have raised you, fed you, and made you all that you are. Despite what you may think given recent revelations, I care for you as any mother would care for her child. If I can offer you anything, it is free will. So I offer you a choice: whose daughter will you be?”

“I don’t know,” Despara answered honestly. “I just don’t know yet.”

“Know this: whatever your decision, it will be final. If you choose Hordak, you must give your soul to him completely. There will be no more of this confusion, this doubt that plagues you. You will be our daughter and ours alone.”

“I understand,” Despara said.

“Likewise,” Shadow Weaver continued, “If you choose Randor, you will forever be a target of The Horde, the pariah that everyone who wears your master’s crest will despise. They will spit upon you and curse your name. You will never be able to return, and even I will be your enemy.”

A tear traced its way down Despara’s cheek as she took in her mother’s words. “I understand,” she choked.

“Then choose wisely. Despara or Adora? Heir or enemy? You have until the Tribute to make your choice.”

“Thank you for allowing me to have one,” she said meekly.

Shadow Weaver nodded, letting go. “Now leave my sight before I change my mind.”

Despara scooped up her mask, pulling it over her face as she left. She adjusted its specs to remain still and emotionless, hiding the storm that raged within her, playing across her face in gasps and sobs. As she walked past the severed aquatic head once more, its eyes again followed her. Even hidden behind her mask, the Force Captain had never before felt so exposed.



Some distance away, within the dungeon of Hordak's tower, Skeletor rose as he heard his cell door open. Shifting his gaze to the door, he saw the familiar shape of Catra. She stepped inside quietly, allowing it to close once more before she spoke. "Greetings."

He nodded in greeting. "Do you have news for me or is this simply a social call?"

"It's whatever you want it to be," the woman in red answered demurely.

"We've been down that road already," he replied coldly. "I expect news."

"As you wish," she said, amused at his continued rebuffs. "I have discovered the source of Hordak's magic-blocking spell."

"And?" he asked.

She smiled, proud of her discovery. "It's not a spell at all, surprisingly, but rather some kind of device that emits a strange pulse at regular intervals. I located it during my last security sweep. It never used to show up on my readings, but apparently he's jacked its power up considerably for the festivities."

"Festivities?" Skeletor asked.

"Tomorrow night is the annual Tribute," she answered. "It is the night when-"

The skull-faced sorcerer waved his hand dismissively. "'There is no need to instruct me. I remember. I assume then that the machine must block certain brainwaves that only magic wielders use. So it is science then, rather than magic, that hinders me."

"Apparently so," she replied.

"I don't find that surprising at all," Skeletor said, "but it's unfortunate for your master. It's far easier to destroy a machine than to undo a spell."

"And this is what you would have me do?" Catra asked with a purr.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“So soon? But tomorrow is the Tribute,” she protested. “There will be warlords from many different worlds here. Security will be tripled.”

“Exactly,” Skeletor replied.

“I don’t understand,” Catra said.

“Hordak is likely to be distracted. Your timing in finding the device is a welcome surprise.”

“And you promise Despara will be gone after the Tribute?” the woman asked, more as a challenge than a question.

Skeletor nodded. “One way or the other.”

19.

PREPARATIONS

Gathered around the smoldering campfire of the night before, Adam, Kira 'Na and the members of the Great Rebellion were riveted to the words of a small Kon-Seal as it spoke. Loo-Kee had returned, dirty from the soot and ash of the Fright Zone's factories. It had been nearly five days since he had left the Whispering Woods on a mission to find a way for Adam and Kira 'Na to enter the Horde stronghold undetected. While seeing him alive and well, if not a bit soiled, was a good thing, his news was not so welcome. "There is only one way, Outworlders, but it will be difficult. I searched as much of Hordak's tower as I could manage while staying inside its duct system, but I only found one section that was large enough for folks your size to fit in. Luckily, it leads to Hordak's private space dock, almost all the way at the top, but there were lots of guards, so you'll have to be careful. I have the coordinates here." The diminutive creature handed Adam a small electronic device.

"Thank you, Loo-Kee," Adam said. "You don't know how much you've helped. We wouldn't have even known where to start without this knowledge. I can't thank you enough."

The Kon-Seal smiled broadly. "I'm happy to do anything I can that puts a

hydrowrench in Hordak's plans, no matter how small, but you'll need to be careful," Loo-Kee said. "I was stuck in that vent for two days, afraid to move."

"Why is that?" Kira 'Na asked with concern.

"Catra," the Kon-Seal said simply. "I saw her there several times. With her enhanced senses, I was worried that I'd be discovered. You may be, as well."

"We'll bear that in mind, my friend," Adam replied.

"The Tribute is tomorrow night, Adam," Glimmer reminded him. "Do you have enough time to prepare?"

"I've had less time in past battles," he answered. "Either way, it doesn't sound like we have much choice."

"I'll be coming with you," Castaspella said.

Adam shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow that. This is a one-way mission. We won't be returning."

"Let me worry about that," the sorceress of Mystacor said without hesitation. "I need to stop Shadow Weaver."

"You never did tell us how you planned on doing that," Bow commented.

"With this," Castaspella replied, pulling out a large golden knife with a shadow gem embedded into its handle. "It will absorb the power of her own shadow gem, taking it from her forever."

"How does it work?" Bow asked, his gaze tight on the mystical weapon as he spoke.

"It's simple enough," the woman replied. "I drive it into her heart."

"Killing her?" Adam asked.

"I'm not sure that she can be killed," she answered.

"I don't know if I'm comfortable with that," the Eternian king admitted.

Becoming defensive, the young woman pointed her index finger toward him angrily. "You're not the one who had your world stolen from you and given to an intergalactic despot. You weren't imprisoned by magic for so long that everyone you knew and loved has died and gone," she challenged.

“I’m not saying that I don’t understand the desire,” Adam replied, “but there must be some alternative.”

“She was once my friend, Adam,” she said, her voice quieting as she calmed herself. “If there is another way, I will embrace it. But if not, I will do what I must to end her evil.”

“I understand,” he said quietly.

“Either way, I’m coming,” she said. “With or without your approval.”

“We could use the help,” Adam admitted. “But we need to keep the party small to make detection less likely.”

“I’ll help you get there,” Bow said, “but I agree. The fewer of you that enter that place, the better your chances of completing your mission. I’ll part ways with you once you get to the ventilation shaft.”

“As will I,” Glimmer said with a tight smile. “I don’t like the danger that you will be heading into, but this early into the rebellion, it could be a great victory for us. Perhaps it can even rally more to our cause.” The princess of Bright Moon kept her worries that they wouldn’t survive to herself.



The next day passed quickly and before Adam knew it, he and his allies were getting ready to begin the final phase of their mission. Razz quickly shuffled her way toward him and the diminutive woman surprised him with a warm embrace. “Good luck, Deary. I hope you find your father and uncle.”

“Thank you,” he said simply as she released him from a surprisingly tight grip. “So do I.” As he spoke the words, he pictured his old enemy Skeletor and felt a chill run down his spine. Adam would be glad to have his lie come to an end, even if it was an uncomfortable one. With that, he and his companions made their way out of the Rebellion’s camp and, guided by the device given to him by Loo-Kee, headed toward the Fright Zone.



Despara had thus far avoided seeing both Skeletor and Randor after her discussion with Shadow Weaver. She needed to think. She paced her quarters, the lonely, confined place seeming more alien to her than usual. At least Horror Hall had some personality. Her private quarters had none. They were very nearly barren, making them lifeless and dull, with no sense of home to them. Taken in from every angle they were plain and nondescript. A blank slate. *Is that all that I've ever been?* she asked herself. *And if so, is it finally time for a change?*

She sat down in the room's lone chair and stared at the white walls. Upon the wall opposite where she sat was a single mirror, placed there recently in an attempt to force her to confront the truth. She gazed at the girl within it, more a stranger now than she ever had been in the past. In a blur of movement, Despara leapt up and slammed her armored fist into the reflective surface of the mirror. It cracked, splitting her face's reflection down the center. The right side of the mirror remained nearly unbroken, while the left splintered into a spider web of lines, giving her a deformed appearance. Rearing back her hand, she struck it again and again until it shattered into dozens of shards of broken glass. Looking at the mess she'd made of it, it felt appropriate; finally a true mirror of how she felt.

Skeletor knew more than he was letting on. She was certain of this. Now that Shadow Weaver had explained Hordak's plan to her, Skeletor's reaction to hearing about the Cosmic Key made all the more sense. He hadn't told her of Hordak's plan, but he seemed aware of it. Maybe he didn't know the whole picture, but he knew enough. There had been an urgency in his questions that followed that Despara had not seen from him before. He seemed almost worried. Once again hiding herself within her disguise, Despara locked her mask into a static state. It was an effort to hide the turmoil that her face would surely show without it. Despite said turmoil, she made her way to the door with a purposeful stride. She had wanted to make her decision in a vacuum, but the reality was that she needed more information. She had heard of Hordak's plan from Shadow Weaver's point of view, the zealous and fervent supporter of her adoptive father trying to convince her of its righteousness. Now she wanted to hear the other side of the story.



The door to Skeletor's cell opened with a soft whooshing sound. Despara found the sorcerer asleep, his arm draped over his face in an effort to find comfort in darkness. Skeletor had no eyes to close, and the bright lights of the cell were a conscious attempt to keep him from getting comfortable. "Lights, dim to 40 percent," she said aloud. At her command, the harsh lighting faded. Hearing her voice, the skull-faced prisoner stirred and sat up.

"Thank you," he said.

"We need to talk," she said simply.

"Then talk."

She sat down next to him on the cot and removed her mask. In doing so, Despara noticed that her close proximity appeared to unsettle him as he soon shifted further away from her. She couldn't quite explain why she had sat there, instead of across the room, but she remained regardless. They had spent much time together over the past several months. Granted, she had spent much of that time trying to make his life miserable, but somewhere during the course of their interactions, something had changed. *In a life with no friends, she thought, it is your enemies that know you the best.* "Shadow Weaver told me of Hordak's plan; the goal he has been working toward. Remaking the world."

"And?" he asked.

"It's madness," she answered. "How much of it are you aware of? I feel you know more than what you have told me."

"I heard it from Hordak's own mouth," he said. "I know it in great detail."

She turned her face toward his. "And what is your impression?"

"I agree with your assessment."

His answer surprised her. "Would you not work toward the same goal were you in his position? If you had the tools?" she asked.

"No."

“But why not?” she continued. “You crave power, do you not? Why not have the ultimate power: control over all of existence?”

It didn't take him long to answer. “Because I'm not insane.” He paused before continuing. “More than that, the very idea of how he plans to accomplish this offends me. It has always offended me.” He sat still, reflecting. “You have to understand, I spent much of my youth trying to take back what was stolen from me. Not just my kingdom, as I was the eldest son, but my dignity and respect. I was born to rule, of royal blood like you, and yet I was cast out from my home, doomed to wander the world largely alone. Throughout my entire life, I've never had anything simply handed to me. I had to scrape and claw and fight for everything I could claim as my own. To rewrite reality in my own image, to, in essence, program the universe's beings to honor me, to kneel at my feet,” he paused, looking her in the eye as he continued, “that would be a hollow victory.”

“You would rather earn it?” she asked.

“Or take it by force,” he answered, “but I would want it as it is. To rule over a reality twisted into my image would be to rule over a lie.”

“How so?” she asked.

“In order to explain, I'll need to tell you a story.”

“We have time,” she said.

He nodded. “When I was young, long before I became Skeletor, I was known as ‘Keldor.’ Randor and I shared a father, but my mother was a Gar witch. From an early age, I was fascinated by magic and sorcery. She taught me my first spell shortly after my father banished us from his kingdom. However, it wasn't until much later, during the time in which I had returned home at Randor's request, that I began to study in earnest. An early interest of mine was alchemy, particularly the aspect of taking an object and turning it into something else entirely. You may be familiar with its most popular myth: turning lead to gold.”

“Is such a thing possible?” she asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” he answered. “After much trial and error, I was actually successful, not of turning lead to gold, but of another transformation no less impressive. At first I felt euphoric. It didn't last, however, and my joy quickly subsided. Do you understand why the feeling was fleeting?”

“Because the end result wasn't earned?” she wagered.

“Exactly,” he said. “After my success, I quickly lost interest in the art form. What Hordak intends to do is an affront to science and sorcery both. He may think that it is the pinnacle of both practices working in tandem, but it is in fact neither. What it is, my dear, is alchemy. It is trickery, the sleight of hand without the magic. He intends to become master of the universe, but to have to end that universe in order to then recreate it, is in fact allowing the universe to master you. In such a hollow victory, one would only be admitting defeat. He cannot claim the universe as it is, so he will try to trick it into becoming something else. And what then? What happens if he is successful? I have known Hordak for many long years and one thing he will never be is satisfied. He already rules much of this galaxy, and even beyond. It is not enough for him. It will never be enough for him.”

“But do you think it’s even possible?” she asked. “Do you think he can do it?”

“To do what he plans, he must first unmake the universe. That, I believe he can do,” he answered. “It’s the rest I have my doubts about. What there can be no doubt about is that the ramifications of his actions, successful or not, would be dire. I’ve seen Hordak accomplish feats even I’d thought impossible. If he’s as close as I believe he is, then we all have something to worry about. Elesian was his home world, and it held the final piece of the puzzle. He left it there an eon ago for safekeeping. You were simply sent to retrieve it. This is a sign that he has nearly everything else he needs. Do you understand? He’s assembled nearly all of the components that his plan requires. If we are to survive, not just you and me, but the universe itself, taking the Cosmic Key, not to mention your father, from Hordak is a necessity.”

“Due to Randor’s ties to the Grayskull bloodline,” she added.

“Yes, and yours, as well,” he said. “I don’t know what Hordak and Shadow Weaver have told you, but you’d be a fool to think that he doesn’t consider you an alternative to Randor, or more accurately, that Randor is simply an alternative to you. It’s far more likely that you were Hordak’s original prize.”

“Shadow Weaver claims Hordak wanted me as an heir,” she said. “She was adamant about that.”

He shook his head knowingly. “Then she is the fool, and I know that you are too intelligent to believe her. You feel it in your gut now, don’t you? The danger. Hordak will never have an heir. He does not share power. If a time comes when his body begins to die, he will simply find some way to create a new one or move his essence into someone else’s mortal shell. There are spells that

can accomplish both and if I am aware of them, you know that he has already mastered them. All your life, Despara, Hordak has kept you safe and protected, encased in this impenetrable armor,” he indicated it as he spoke. “He wasn’t protecting his daughter. He was protecting what flows within your veins: his investment. Randor falling into his lap was a surprise, I’m sure, but all that did was make you the backup plan instead.”

Despara sat in silence for a long moment. “I’m sure that you are right.” Admitting it was painful, but cathartic. She knew it was the truth.

“All the more reason to get you, your father, and the Cosmic Key far away from that madman.”

“You almost sound heroic,” she said with a wry smile.

He scoffed. “Call it what you wish. I call it saving my own skin.”

20.

THE TRIBUTE

Much later that same day, Skeletor, lost in thought, found himself stirred by the sound of his cell door opening once more. This time, it was not Despara or Catra, but rather a contingent of troopers that met him as he stood. “You are to come with us,” the one closest to him said in a commanding tone.

“What for?” Skeletor asked. “Who are you to command me?”

“We are acting under orders handed down by Hordak himself, Sorcerer,” the trooper said. “He wishes to see you before the Tribute begins.”

Skeletor laughed quietly. “I was wondering when he’d call. I haven’t seen him in ages.” His jaw lowered in a mock-smile as the guards shackled him and led him out into the hallway. “I’m sure whatever he has to say will be riveting.” The memories of his life as Keldor having now resurfaced and his veil of madness lifted, Skeletor felt more like himself than he had in many years, but he continued to play the part of the mad sorcerer in front of the troopers. The less in control that The Horde thought he was, the more that they would underestimate him. He had to wonder, however, if he was also playing the part for his own sake; an attempt to control his own worries and doubts. He shook the thought

away.

The group began making their way toward the Horde leader's throne room, the skull-faced sorcerer remaining silent as the troopers led him down familiar passageways that he'd once walked through freely, so long ago. Hordak's Etherian base of operations was established shortly before Skeletor and Evil-lyn were stranded on Tellus by the Horde leader, but Skeletor had a long memory and his march toward Hordak's throne room was familiar territory. Though there were elements of his time with The Horde that Skeletor remembered fondly, namely the power that he wielded, he had no regrets that those days were in his past. He would never be content while serving another.

He wondered silently to himself what it was Hordak intended to do with him. It had been months since Skeletor had first been imprisoned here, and he'd yet to have any kind of contact with his former teacher. He assumed that Hordak kept him alive simply because it amused him. This meeting could merely be a show of strength before the yearly Tribute, the night in which Hordak honored himself more than any other, which was saying something as Skeletor knew that Hordak's ego rivaled his own, and perhaps even surpassed it. Hordak fancied himself a demigod, and his goal was to become the only god, twisting reality to his whim. As Skeletor had told Despara, Hordak's plan proved his insanity.

Skeletor vividly remembered the moment in which Hordak had first shared his grand vision with his former pupil. Skeletor was not one to be shaken or disturbed, but Hordak's plan was mad, and he had recognized that fact instantly. The only thing that disturbed him more was the possibility that the intergalactic despot could possibly achieve it, or at least destroy reality in the process. In his time with The Horde, Skeletor had seen Hordak achieve many things he had thought impossible; spells that had no recorded history, lost to time; battles in which the troops that Hordak had sent out where wholly outmatched that were won with resounding victory. Despara had given Hordak a vital piece of the puzzle he'd spent ages trying to put in the proper sequence. He was closer now than Skeletor had ever thought he could be, and he had to admit, if only to himself, that the prospect frightened him.

If Hordak failed, he could very well destroy all of existence, and even if he succeeded, it was possible that he could cause Skeletor to never be born. Hordak would rewrite history in his favor, eliminating all of his enemies in one fell swoop, effectively erasing them. Skeletor valued nothing if not himself and the legacy he would leave upon the universe. A victory by Hordak in this endeavor would undoubtedly eliminate such a legacy, and most likely Skeletor himself. He was not about to let that happen. Skeletor knew that Hordak needed two things

to guarantee his success: the Cosmic Key and the blood of a powerful magic bloodline. Currently, with Randor imprisoned and the Key in his possession, Hordak had both. It was most likely that the only thing he was missing at this point were the temporal coordinates themselves, the part of the Key's sequence that would transport him to the correct moment in time, the moment in which the first spark of life had burst into being.

It was no coincidence that Skeletor's plan for escape involved both the rescue of Randor and the theft of the Key. At first, Randor's role in his plan was simply as a means to break down the walls that Despara's brainwashing had put into place. Skeletor would have found some way to include himself in the escape no matter what events occurred, but the revelation that the Cosmic Key was still in Hordak's possession and that his plan was continuing with alarming success pressed the issue and was the perfect opportunity that Skeletor needed. In both preventing Hordak's success and escaping back to Tellus with Randor, Skeletor would achieve two victories simultaneously over his former teacher. The thought made him grin.

Skeletor's guards, numbering a dozen, a figure that showed him Hordak still feared his power despite his not being able to tap into the magic that surrounded him, lead him to an elevator that signaled the end of their journey. Stepping into the large lift, the thirteen of them tested its weight limit. The trooper in front pressed the button for the penultimate floor of the tower, residing just under Hordak's personal hangar. As they traveled upward, Skeletor prepared himself for the possibility that Hordak intended to kill him. Hordak had a tendency to keep his enemies alive so that their suffering could continue to amuse him, however Skeletor knew that Hordak feared him, if only a little. Other than D'Vann Grayskull, Skeletor and Evil-Lyn had come closer to defeating the despot than anyone in Hordak's unnaturally long life, and that had been immediately after Skeletor's transformation. He'd since had years to continue pushing the limits of his power, all the while amassing more control over it. And now, despite the emotional turmoil that remembering his past as Keldor had caused him, he was once again in control over himself as well. He was more dangerous now than ever, and he knew it.

The sound of the opening door brought Skeletor back to the present and he felt his muscles flex involuntarily, preparing himself for what may come. As the troopers led him into the throne room, Hordak sat up slightly. To someone who didn't know Hordak intimately, the act of his coming to attention, no longer in a state of comfort, would have been imperceptible, but Skeletor noticed. It was subtle, but a sign that confirmed Skeletor's suspicions. Hordak still considered him a threat. Good. That could be another reason he'd kept his distance,

Skeletor realized. If so, it worked in Skeletor's favor.

"Bring him here," Hordak told the troopers, who did as he commanded without delay. Comprised of a multitude of species from various worlds spread across the cosmos, the Horde troopers were the vilest in nature of each of their respective planets' citizens. Many had killed members of their own families as a part of their initiation. Conquering entire worlds, there were few horrors that they had not been witness to, or the cause of. Despite this, the gray and black armored soldiers still feared Hordak above all else, and that fact kept them in their place. Skeletor had long ago let go of his fear of the man himself. What he feared was what Hordak's madness was capable of. The sorcerer tried to remember this as he was dragged to Hordak's feet and forced down to his knees. Only then did Hordak stand; a blatant act of posturing and in Skeletor's mind, another sign that Hordak was not taking him lightly. The thought encouraged him. "It's been a long time, my apprentice," Hordak said.

"That it has, but I ceased being your apprentice long ago," Skeletor replied.

The Horde leader smiled, the expression twisting his alien face grotesquely. "I disagree. Your presence here alone proves that you still have much to learn."

"You'd be surprised at the things I've learned in my time here," Skeletor said.

"Oh, I am well aware that you know of Despara's origins; that you've been speaking with her." Hordak crossed his arms confidently. "Nothing you say or do can remove her from my power."

Skeletor scoffed. "I don't care about your adopted daughter any more today than I did when you first stole her. I have more important things to worry about."

Hordak nodded. "On that we agree. You see, I've begun asking myself why I continue to keep you here. I need Randor, you know this, but you? Your blood is impure. You pose no threat to me or my empire. More than that, your presence here no longer amuses me."

Skeletor laughed softly. "The latter may be true."

Hordak cocked his head slightly. "So you feel you are still a threat? Even while you kneel before me in chains?"

Skeletor stood up and met Hordak face-to-face, his empty eye sockets blazing red. The Horde troopers came to attention in reaction to his movement, but Hordak held up his right hand and they held their places. “These chains won’t last, Hordak,” Skeletor said angrily. “If you kill me, it will only be out of fear, and all of your men will know it, or do you think that they have forgotten the stories of my time at your right hand? The atrocities that I committed as the leader of your army? I will always be a threat to you, more than you could ever know.”

Hordak’s still-raised hand suddenly lashed out with a powerful spell, knocking Skeletor to the ground. “You dare accuse me of being afraid?” The Horde leader asked in a booming voice. “Of you?”

Skeletor grinned. “Your denial of my power will be the undoing of all of your plans.”

“Your power is of little use to you here,” Hordak said.

“You speak of my magic,” Skeletor replied, “but you forget my most powerful weapons: my mind and my will. Two things you can never take from me.”

Hordak laughed. “We’ll see how well your mind or your will serve you when your head is on display in my throne room. Tonight, as soon as the Tribute is over, Skeletor, your execution will be witnessed by the entire Horde, and anyone misguided enough to fear you or your sorcery will be proven a fool.” With a gesture, Hordak commanded the troopers to take Skeletor away. The sorcerer was pulled violently back into the elevator. Before the doors closed, he smiled at Hordak, but inwardly he felt a pang of concern. He wasn’t concerned about Despara for he felt that he knew where her allegiances now lied, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Catra would fulfill her end of their deal.



Hours later, Despara sat at Hordak’s right hand as men and women of countless cultures and species presented him with gifts from their respective worlds, all under the control of The Horde. Catra watched her intently. She observed that the girl seemed to be distracted and not paying much attention to

the night's festivities. When the unbearably long procession was finally over, the annual post-tribute feast began and Catra watched as the Force Captain excused herself from the large hall. With a nod to Hordak, Catra excused herself and followed his daughter through the crowd. A small handful of dignitaries, those who had been loyal to Hordak for many years, stopped her rival and exchanged pleasantries, or what passed for them in a room full of despots and warlords. Despite the occasional short verbal encounters that slowed the Force Captain, Catra saw that Despara remained undeterred, and very nearly in a straight line, made her way to the exit.

Normally very astute and aware of her surroundings, if Despara had noticed Catra, she hadn't let on. Catra had a feeling that the girl was somewhere else entirely mentally. She wondered if Skeletor had been right. Would Hordak's own daughter seek to free the Eternian and betray their master? As Despara exited the throne room and made a right down the adjacent hallway, Catra resigned herself to the fact that she may never know. Walking through the exit, Catra glanced to her right, catching sight of the Force Captain in the distance as the black-clad woman made her way away from the feast. Instead of following her, Catra made a left and headed off on a mission of her own.

■ ■ ■

Reaching to the rear of her belt, Despara pulled out the small electronic device that her adoptive father had given her before her Cosmic Key-aided trip to Elesian. Hidden beneath her flowing cape, it had remained unnoticed during the tribute, even as she sat directly next to Hordak. It seemed small and inconsequential, but its appearance was deceptive, as it had changed the course of her life, and would continue to do so tonight. The Force Captain had recalibrated the simple device to hone in not on the musical tones the Key would use, but rather the Key itself. The device may only work within a short range, but Despara felt that it was only a matter of time before it brought her to the Key.

■ ■ ■

Dozens of levels further down within Hordak's sky-piercing tower, Skeletor sat quietly within his cell. Tonight was the Tribute, and more than that, the night that Skeletor was to be executed before all of the highest ranking members of The Horde as a reminder to them that no one was untouchable. The annual event must have started by now. If everything went according to plan, by this time tomorrow, Skeletor would still be alive and well and, most importantly, galaxies away from here. He tried not to think of his impending execution, instead hoping that Catra would prove useful in returning his ability to access the magic that surrounded him. However even without it, his escape was almost assured.

Skeletor knew that Randor's daughter needed him in order to make the Cosmic Key work, and he was sure that she would choose her birth father over Hordak. In many ways, she already had, even if she didn't recognize it. Power was seductive, no one knew that better than he did, but the heart was fragile. Even he was no stranger to its weaknesses, as Evil-Lyn had proved. Despara would choose Randor, free the man, and then come here for him. He was sure of it, and when all was said and done, not only would Skeletor be free, but he will have stolen the Cosmic Key and not one but two of Grayskull's heirs in the process, crippling Hordak's grand design before he could claim victory. The thought soothed the half-Gar sorcerer. Hordak may think that Skeletor wasn't a threat to him, but he would soon learn just how wrong he was.



Adam, Bow, Glimmer, Castaspella, and Kira 'Na, who still carried the Havok Staff, approached the edge of the Dark Forest, the woods under the floating city of Mystacor which were situated between the Whispering Woods and the Fright Zone. Each of them gazed at the industrialized city before them. Their journey through the Dark Forest had not been pleasant, but they had managed to make it this far without detection from The Horde. Adam glanced down for what felt like the hundredth time at the instrument that Loo-Kee had given him containing the coordinates of their destination. Their journey had taken longer than they had anticipated and darkness had fallen. If they didn't arrive soon, the Tribute and the feast that followed it would be over, their window of opportunity closed.

Thankfully the device confirmed Adam's suspicions as they approached an access hole into the street just inside the outside edge of the Fright Zone: they would not have to journey all the way to the tower exposed. As camouflaged as Loo-Kee can become, Adam would have been amazed if he had had to accomplish such a feat. No, it seemed the entrance was here, beneath the streets. He was thankful for their continued luck. He just hoped that it would last the night. Adam turned to his Etherian companions and took them in for what was likely to be the last time. Bow and Glimmer would be heading back to their camp soon. The rest of this mission would be carried out by him, Kira 'Na and Castaspella alone. "Thank you for everything, my friends. I'm sorry that I cannot stay and aide you in defeating The Horde, but I must return to my own world. I can only pray that one day Etheria will be returned to its people."

Glimmer squeezed Adam hard as he hugged her. "You have done more for us than you realize, Adam. You've given us hope."

He was taken aback. "How so?"

"We never thought that we could get this close. This entrance could one day be very useful to us. More than that, knowing that there are other worlds out there that Hordak has not claimed gives us hope that there are others like you: strong-willed and willing to fight against that monster. It gives us hope that all is not yet lost. We understand that you have to leave, to spirit your family away, but perhaps we'll see you again someday."

He smiled. "I would like that very much." Turning to Bow, he reached out for a handshake.

The archer took hold of his hand and, to his surprise, pulled him in for a quick embrace, following it up with a solid clap on his shoulder. "Good luck to you all. Kira 'Na, I hope you and Adam succeed in your mission and that you're able to make it back to your people. When you get home, Adam, be sure to teach your son to shoot straight," he said with a wink. "And, Casta, I want you to know that you will always have a home with the Rebellion."

"Thank you, Bow," she answered. "I'm sure we'll meet again soon."

"Goodbye, dear friends," Glimmer said quietly.

"Don't say 'goodbye,'" Adam replied. "Say 'good journey.' It's an old Eternian saying: 'Live the journey, for every destination is but a doorway to another.' This may be the end of our time together now, but we all still have quite the journey ahead. Perhaps we will meet again, after all. You never know."

Glimmer blinked away a tear. “No, I suppose you don’t.” She took a moment to regain her composure. “Good luck.”

“Thank you,” Kira ‘Na replied solemnly. “We are sure to need it.”

21.

CHOICES

As Despara walked further and deeper into the bowels of Hordak's tower, her father's device beeped more frequently and with more intensity, letting her know that she was on the right track. The Cosmic Key was getting closer. Despara understood her adoptive father well enough to know that a tool of such power would not be left unguarded. During the Tribute, she had paid close attention not to those generals and dignitaries who were there, parading themselves before Hordak in an effort to be noticed, but rather those who were not. There were several notable beings amongst the Horde ranks that had been missing. Among them were Leech, an energy-draining alien, Grizzlor, a monstrous beast of a creature with more intelligence than he let on, and Octavia, an amphibious woman with four extra arms, all of which were skilled with a blade.

Despara knew that whoever was guarding the Key would not be some random trooper. It would have to be someone that Hordak trusted enough, someone loyal enough to the cause that, even if they weren't aware what the Key itself was, would guard it with their life simply because Hordak had told them to. In her eyes, that only left one possibility.

Taking a right around a corner, Despara's device beeped shrilly before

silencing itself. Glancing around her, she was surprised to see nothing. No doors, no stairwells, nothing but red banners that lined the shadowy hallway at regular intervals. She felt in her heart that this must be the place, not only because of the device, but because of the warning in the back of her mind that grew ever louder and more prominent the longer she stood in the dark hallway. She'd never been in this part of the tower before, that much was certain. Switching her mask's vision enhancements to infrared, she scanned the hallway, searching for anything that seemed out of place. Ahead of her and to the left, one of the decorative Horde banners appeared slightly warmer in her readings than the others. *Strange*, she thought as she approached it. She placed her right hand gently upon its silky surface and pushed, expecting to feel the cold steel of the wall behind the sheet. Instead, her hand continued into a recession before it came upon a hard surface perhaps six inches deeper than the wall should have been. She pulled the banner aside delicately and switched back to her regular vision, revealing the front face of a door, hidden behind the banner. It was warm to the touch, its being heated an indication that it was still in use.

A clever way to hide something, Father, she thought, *although surprisingly rustic compared to your usual tastes*. Quietly, she entered her personal code in an effort to get the door to open, but was disappointed as its control panel flashed red and buzzed in error. The door simply stared at her, unmoving. She hadn't expected it to be that easy, but the experiment had at least confirmed it. Despara placed her father's device back into her belt's rear pouch before pulling out another of her own. Scramblers were forbidden in the Fright Zone, especially within Hordak's tower, but it had been a long time since anyone had searched the Force Captain for contraband. Her loyalty was beyond doubt in the eyes of her troopers. This particular scrambler was purchased some time back from a locksmith on the planet of Silax. She had used it to her advantage several times during raids on cultures that possessed advanced locking mechanisms for their doors. It was easier than blasting the entrances down and killing those within. It also gave her and her troops the element of surprise, which was very useful in those types of situations. Her using it during raids was no secret to her troopers. The fact that she never turned it in upon returning to the Fright Zone was her own business.

She held the device to the hidden door. It was unlikely that anyone would catch her snooping around this deep in the tower. No one ever came down here, at least as far as she knew. Regardless, she glanced to her left and right to make sure no one would see her as she initialized the decoding sequence. After a few moments, the door slid open with a shudder to a dark room beyond. Upon her entering its confines, the hidden room's lights flickered on in response. The

room itself was in disrepair. Cobwebs clung to the high corners of the walls where they met the ceiling. Dust covered old computers that hadn't been used in ages. It looked as if no one had set foot in this room in years, but Despara knew better. More than likely this was just a front, a false-face hiding something further beyond. Her adoptive father was a master of sleight-of-hand and his using it to protect such a vital tool as the Cosmic Key was unsurprising.

Walking further into the room, she studied her surroundings. Seeing nothing but unused and nondescript items, she looked for another hidden door, but nothing caught her eye. With a sudden pop, the lights exploded, plunging the room into darkness once more. Her mask automatically compensated by returning to infrared vision, but before her eyes could adjust she was lifted off her feet by a violent blow to her right side. Something had run into her full-bore, sending her to the floor in a heap. Snapping her gaze in the direction the blow had come from, she was struck solidly by another attack: a heavy computer chair that the unidentified opponent had hurled in her direction with an animalistic roar. Her mask's infrared vision had not been able to see the cold chair, appearing black against an even blacker backdrop. She switched to standard night vision, picking up and enhancing what little light was entering the room from the hidden place her attacker had been stationed. She dodged the following attack by deftly rolling away, just narrowly being missed by another piece of equipment flung in her direction with startling accuracy. "Cease your attack immediately!" she shouted. "Don't you know who I am?!"

"I have orders to kill anyone who enters this room, Force Captain," the creature known as Grizzlor responded, its lips curling up to expose fangs that glistened even in her night vision. "Even you." Despara was not surprised to find that it was Grizzlor guarding her father's precious Key. The creature from the planet Jungulia had long ago had his memories erased by Hordak before being brainwashed to serve his master unquestioningly. Only Grizzlor could be trusted not to take the Key for himself, if he even knew what it did. Grizzlor had once been a close ally of Despara's, the monstrous general even going so far as to train her in unarmed combat, but his soul belonged to Hordak and he would kill her, just as he had threatened, because those were his orders. The monstrous Horde general stood nearly three heads taller than Despara and was twice as wide, his muscular torso covered in a dense fur. Sharp claws jutted out from his eight fingers.

"Stand down, you idiot!" she yelled, bringing herself into a crouching position. She unclasped her cape, letting it fall to the floor behind her. "I'm here on a mission for Lord Hordak."

Grizzlor grunted. “Any missions regarding the device are known to me, Force Captain, and your mission to Elesian is long over. Whatever your purpose for being here, it is your own, and that makes it treason.” The Jungulian bared his large fangs once more before lunging at her with a roar. He must have had incredible night vision of his own, she thought, as he leapt over the previously flung chair in the near-complete darkness on his way toward her. At the last possible moment, she once again rolled out of the way, dodging his attack. He crashed violently into the wall behind her before leaping back up to his feet with a snarl.

Despara knew that this was a pivotal moment. Killing a trooper meant nothing, but Grizzlor was no mere trooper, he was one of Hordak’s most trusted generals. If she killed him, there was no turning back. It would be treason. As he slashed at her with his claws, connecting with the armor that protected her stomach, she realized too late that that moment of decision had already come and gone. She had made it the moment she had agreed with Skeletor that Hordak’s plan was insane. How could she possibly choose insanity? Besides that, this fight had already started and there was no backing down now. It would be a fight to the death. It was now simply a matter of being the one who walked away. “All right, you son of a Twigget, if that’s how this is going to be...” she trailed off as she pulled out her blaster, firing in Grizzlor’s direction. It was a strange feeling for her to be fighting someone she had once battled alongside, but Despara knew she had to be prepared to do whatever was necessary. The blasts from her energy weapon hit Grizzlor point-blank in the chest, but he kept coming, swatting the weapon out of her hand with an angry roar as he rushed her once more. The stink of burning fur filled her nostrils as she stumbled backward. She thrust her closed fist into the Jungulian’s throat and he staggered. She followed up the successful blow with a series of kicks to his midsection, her armored boots connecting again and again with his muscular abdomen.

Growling, he slashed at her once more, but as Despara began to find herself at home with the ebb and flow of the battle, she ducked out of the way. Grizzlor nearly lost his footing as his claws swept through the empty air where her head had been mere seconds before. Following a well-placed blow to the back of her attacker’s neck, Despara jumped backward and away, an agile back flip gaining her enough distance to draw her twin swords from their sheaths. The massive Horde general spun back in her direction only to have Despara drive her swords deep into his chest. In her mind, her victory had been assured as soon as she had committed to the fight.

His animalistic howl ceased as his lungs were punctured, replaced by a sickening gurgle that escaped from his mouth along with a spatter of green

blood. Grizzlor's eyes blazed with hatred before clouding over. After a moment that seemed to drag on forever, he fell backward with a thud. Removing her blades from his chest, Despara was surprised to find herself feeling pity for the creature. Like her, he'd had his identity and past erased in order to become a weapon in Hordak's arsenal. Now he had his peace. She hoped to find her own peace, and soon, but prayed that she would not come upon it as violently as he had. "Sorry, old friend," she said quietly, her voice sounding small in the suddenly quiet room.

Cleaning her swords on Grizzlor's thick fur, she returned the weapons to their sheaths and walked toward the hidden room he had emerged from when her back had been turned. A very faint amount of light escaped from where he had failed to close its door all of the way. Hidden within the wall, the door had blended in seamlessly when closed. She pulled it open gently, the light from within blinding to her night vision enhanced lenses. She returned the setting to normal and walked in.

All around her were magical artifacts from a thousand different cultures, weapons from across the ages, and ceremonial armors that Hordak had worn before inventing the nanomite-laced suit he now wore, similar to her own. This was more than a room where the Cosmic Key was hidden away, she realized. It was a trophy room. Standing near the back of the surprisingly large room was a statue of Skeletor wearing a black and purple armored chest plate, a stylized version of the Horde bat logo emblazoned across it. Skeletor had once been a great Horde leader himself, serving directly under Hordak as his apprentice. She musingly wondered whether or not he would outrank her if he had stayed. Despara raised her eyebrow curiously as she saw that part of the statue's head was missing, apparently blasted away by her father after their falling out. Hordak seemed to have little attachment to anything, but this proved otherwise. His hatred for Skeletor could only be born out of betrayal, a bond between the two that had been broken. Seeing it gave her adoptive father a depth that she hadn't expected to find. No wonder he kept the statue hidden here. It was the only sign of weakness she'd ever seen from him.

Looking upon the statue more closely, Despara noticed that the armor it wore was not sculpted, but rather a separate piece. Acting on a hunch, she pulled a small dagger from her belt and scratched the armor's surface. Within moments, it reformed and healed itself. *So this is the prototype Hordak once spoke of*, she thought. *It was intended for Skeletor!* With his magic now gone, a byproduct of being in the Fright Zone, Skeletor was susceptible to injury. She had inflicted enough harm on him herself to know. Aware that she needed the sorcerer in one piece in order for him to operate the Cosmic Key and aid in her

rescue of Randor and their subsequent escape, she reached to the sides of the armor and unclasped it, taking it with her. It was light and compact, much like her own was, and she carried it easily.

Glancing about the room, she saw a pedestal on the opposite wall that had a black sheet draped over it. She had yet to see the Key and assumed that the object hidden beneath must be it. As she approached the pedestal and removed the sheet, she saw that she was right. Skeletor had provided a crude drawing of the device upon her request and there was no mistaking that this was indeed the mysterious Cosmic Key, the lynchpin in Hordak's ultimate victory: the rewriting of reality in his image. Although she had to admit that the device was unique, its peculiar design gave no indication of its real power and she found it rather unimpressive at first glance.

Roughly the length of her forearm, the Cosmic Key resembled a musical instrument more than a key in the traditional sense. Cylindrical in shape, the majority of its surface was covered in golden metal keys that, when pressed in the correct order, would create the tones needed for a gateway to be opened. There was also a much larger button, black in color, that Despara imagined must have been the final key needed to initiate the sequence once the proper tones had been entered. Metal spikes jutted out toward the top in a circle, surrounding the key, with another single spike emerging from the top. Two-pronged, she could only describe the spikes as resembling tuning forks that she'd seen musicians use throughout her travels.

Attached to the key was a leather strap intended for carrying purposes. Being mindful not to press any of the buttons as she gently lifted the key off of the pedestal; she attached the strap to her belt and made her way out of the trophy room. As she left, she grabbed a sword with a golden handle, most likely a trophy taken from one of Hordak's fallen enemies. The sword was for Randor. She didn't know if she trusted Skeletor with a weapon. Although he had seemed to be truthful with her so far, and she felt that they were allies, at least under present circumstances, more than one person had warned her of his duplicity and she couldn't discount their warnings. He would have to do more than just talk to prove himself to her. More than that, the man had had the tenacity to betray Hordak, even before his transformation into Skeletor. If the skull-faced sorcerer could betray one of the most powerful beings in the universe, surely he had it within him to betray her.

Despara made her way through the still-dark first room and, stepping over the body of Grizzlor, she was shocked to hear him moan beneath her. The bastard was harder to kill than she had thought and had to have had an

advanced healing factor or some other augmentation given to him by his master. *If I leave him here, he might still survive*, she thought. She stared at him silently for a long moment before moving on. He was clearly in no condition to alert anyone and she was surprised to feel an emotion she'd only heard of but never before felt before tonight: empathy. Grizzlor deserved his peace, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to kill him in cold blood while he was defenseless, an action that even days ago she would not have given a second thought toward. No matter what Despara thought she could control in her life, she couldn't ignore the fact that she was changing.

■ ■ ■

At the opposite end of the tower, yet equally as deep, Catra made her way to the strange device she had told Skeletor about that was blocking magic use within the Fright Zone. She laughed softly to herself. She knew Skeletor had been conspiring with Despara as well. That suited her just fine. If Skeletor's plan failed, Catra would simply show Hordak the recordings of Despara's visits to her master's old enemy and she would still get the result that she wanted. Catra was just waiting for the right moment and what better moment would there be then after she had achieved her own goal? Despara was finished either way and now Skeletor himself was scheduled to be executed tonight. Despara's betrayal could be revealed easily enough and even if Skeletor's escape was unsuccessful, with his death there would now be no one to link Catra to his plans. It was now a win-win situation for her.

Taking in the sight of the device, it seemed deceptively simplistic. The box was small, square and covered with various types of wires and electrodes. There wasn't much to it, but then Hordak surely did not want it attracting attention to itself. Pulling a blaster from the holster that rested upon her left hip, Catra aimed it at the device and smiled. No matter how tonight played out, her victory over Hordak's insufferable daughter was near enough to taste, and it tasted sweet.

■ ■ ■

Randor stirred within his cell as he heard its door slide open. Despara stood in the doorway, a sword with a golden hilt in her left hand, a piece of chest armor in her right. His daughter looked as if she had been in some sort of battle. Her armored suit was dirty, although still in one piece as it was surprisingly tough. Randor was glad to note that she didn't appear to be harmed. The girl walked briskly into the cell and handed him the sword before grabbing him by his arm and pulling him up. "C'mon. We're going."

"I don't understand," Randor said in astonishment. "You're freeing me?"

"Yes, but we don't have time to talk about it. We have to leave," her mask mimicked the myriad of emotions rushing across her face in waves before settling into just one: determination. "Now."

Not stopping to ask any further questions, Randor gripped the hilt of the sword in his hand tightly and smiled at the comforting feeling a warrior had only when holding a weapon. Randor smiled lightly. His long-lost daughter was saving him, presumably to leave this foul place behind. Perhaps the gods were listening after all. He followed her into the empty hallway as she shut the cell door behind them. As she turned away from him, he noticed the strange cylindrical device that hung from her belt, covered with golden keys. He'd never seen anything like it, but he remained silent. His life was in her hands and if they survived this escape there would be plenty of time for explanations later. She turned back to him and nodded in the direction of his old cell. "We're not quite done here yet," she said. "Follow me and keep an eye out for any trouble. Hordak and his generals are distracted by the feast going on as we speak, but it wouldn't take much to bring his whole blasted army down on top of us."

"I understand," he said. "What about the armor?" he asked, indicating the chest-plate she still carried.

"It's not for you," she said simply.

He wasn't sure what she meant, but knew not to question her about it further. She obviously had a plan. They walked briskly down the hallway, taking a left turn at its end. There was, however, one question that he desperately needed answered. "What made you decide?" he asked. "Why me?"

She glanced back at him briefly, her mask reminding him coldly of Hordak. He wished she would remove it, but knew that it would provide protection for her if they ran into trouble. "I told you before that I had a dream of my mother, my

real mother, and a woman who identified herself as the Sorceress of Grayskull. In it, they confirmed the truth.”

“As you’ve said. Thank the gods,” Randor exclaimed.

“It’s not that simple,” she continued. “The truth alone was not enough to influence my decision. One does not simply change who they are overnight.”

“Of course not,” he replied. “Then what was it?”

“Hordak’s plan,” she answered. “I know exactly what he’s been planning all of these centuries. Shadow Weaver told me.”

“And?” Randor asked.

“It’s insane,” she said quietly. “He needs the blood of Grayskull to attain his goal and it required my killing you. It would have been a test of my loyalty. And if I refused, he surely would have killed me and used my own.”

“What is his goal?”

“To become the one god. As I said, it’s insane. When I was confronted with the thought of killing you, I realized it was something I could not do. Not anymore. Not after learning the truth about my origins and who you are to me. I knew at that very moment that I had to free you, and now I’ve come too far down this road to turn back. Whatever life this decision will lead to, it will be my life. I no longer have a choice.” They continued the rest of the way in silence until they reached the doorway of his former cell and Randor felt his heart drop into his stomach as he realized why they were here.

At Despara’s touch, the keypad outside the cell caused the door to open revealing Skeletor, who stood in waiting, his arms folded across his muscular chest. The man’s lower jaw dropped in that sickening mock-smile that Randor was all too familiar with. “Took you long enough, my dear,” Skeletor said impatiently.

“I was held up,” Despara answered.

The sorcerer scoffed. “Much longer and I would have started to worry. I’m scheduled to be executed tonight.”

Randor moved quickly, swinging his newly acquired sword up to Skeletor’s neck, where he stopped it just shy of piercing the pale blue skin that covered his old foe’s throat. “As well you should be,” he seethed. “He cannot be freed!” he said to Despara in a harsh whisper. “He’ll be the death of us.”

“Actually, brother,” Skeletor laughed, the irony of the situation humoring him, “it’s only with my help that you’ll manage to get out of here alive, much less stop Hordak.”

Despara reached up and gently pulled Randor’s arm away. “It’s true.”

“Why?” Randor demanded. “Why do we need him?”

“For this,” she said, showing him the object upon her belt that he had noticed earlier. “It is a device called the Cosmic Key,” she said. “Not only is it the key component of Hordak’s plan to rule the universe, but it is also our means of escape, and of the three of us, only Skeletor knows how to use it.”

Randor looked deep into the empty sockets where his brother’s eyes once were so many years ago, before he had been so fiendishly twisted into the creature that stood before him, and let out a deep breath. If this was the only way, then it was the only way. He would have to trust his daughter. Skeletor, however, was another matter. He would be keeping a close eye on him indeed. “Fine, then let’s go.” He stepped back in order to give Skeletor room to operate the device.

“It won’t work here,” Skeletor said matter-of-factly.

“What?!” Despara demanded.

“Calm down,” he said. “It’s simple. I told you before that the Key is the perfect blend of science and magic, and magic is something we don’t have access to here.”

“So we need to escape the entire Fright Zone?!” she hissed. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because I had a plan,” he answered. “Catra found the device that was blocking magic use. It was her job to disable it.”

Despara nearly screamed in anger. “And you trusted her?”

Skeletor scoffed. “Of course not, but she wants you gone. I figured it would play out in both of our best interests.”

“So when is she supposed to disable it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It should have already happened. I would advise that we move quickly and make for an escape of the Fright Zone now. If she disables it before then, I will feel it and we can proceed as we had originally

planned.”

“This entire escape is already all fouled up,” Despara grouched. She felt her blood pressure rise briefly before taking a deep breath and forcing herself to think rationally.

“When you make plans,” Randor said quietly, “the gods laugh.”

“Well then we had better get a move on if we’re going to do this.” She shoved the armor she carried toward Skeletor. He took it in his hands, cocking his skull to the side in confusion as he did so. “Just put it on and shut up,” she said. “Without magic, you’re vulnerable and we need you alive.”

Skeletor’s jaw lowered in a grin as he shed his leather armor and replaced it with the prototype Horde armor that she had handed him, pulling it over his head and clasping it closed at his sides. Despara motioned for them to move on. “Both of you follow me.” She closed her eyes and resigned herself to the risk they would be taking. “We’re heading for Hordak’s personal hangar.”

22.

CONFRONTATION

Making their journey quietly through the tunnels that wound their way beneath the streets of the Fright Zone, Adam, Kira 'Na and Castaspella were nearing their destination: Hordak's tower. Adam felt perspiration build on his forehead as they neared the entranceway that Loo-Kee had told them about and wiped it away with his forearm. "I thought we'd never find it," Casta whispered. "Although it seems awfully small." A maintenance hatch leading to the cooling vents which serviced the tower, Adam had also noticed that the entrance was indeed small. It would be easy enough for a creature of Loo-Kee's stature to enter at full-height, but almost too compact for Adam and his companions to fit through, even when crawling. He assumed that The Horde used robots for their maintenance work and built them at the appropriate size. Getting three adult humans through would be interesting, and they would certainly have to crawl through the vents single-file until they reached the hanger that was supposed to be their way in. Added to the trip's difficulty, the hanger was located on the uppermost levels of the tower. It would take some time to get to it.

"You're right," he whispered back, "but we don't have much choice." How they would proceed from there was the real question. Loo-Kee had not made it past the hanger during his scouting mission and had in fact nearly been caught

there. A small creature called a Kon-Seal, Loo-Kee's race was known for blending in. If even he had almost gotten caught, it would take a miracle for three humans to make it to the cell-block, which resided on the lower levels, undetected. Adam found himself hoping against hope for that very miracle. Perhaps the feast going on because of this Tribute had thinned out security, the majority of them focused on protecting Hordak from the possibility of attempted coups? Again, he could only hope.

"Who should go first?" Casta asked, drawing Adam's mind back to the task at hand.

"I guess I'll go, then you, and Kira 'Na can bring up the rear," he answered. The two women nodded in agreement and Adam pulled open the small hatch, making his way inside on his hands and knees, followed closely by Casta.

Entering the maintenance hatch herself, Kira 'Na spoke up with a touch of concern in her voice, "Let's hope that there are no sharp turns in these vents, or I'll never get the Havok Staff through." She and Adam both knew that without it, they had no means of escape. They were depending on its magic to open up their getaway portal once they found his father.

The group spent the rest of the trip in silence. During the course of their journey, they came upon several different grated vents, but looking through each one, Adam would continually confirm that they had not yet reached their destination. After what felt like hours but was surely less, they reached one that looked promising. As Adam peered through the grate, Kira 'Na clutched the Havok Staff tightly in her right hand, thankful that the ventilation system had been designed to flow and curve slowly, with no sharp angles that would have forced her to leave it behind.

"This has to be it," he whispered. Opening the grate, which had been loosened previously in preparation by their small ally, Adam peered down to the catwalk four meters below them. It would be a bit of a drop, especially since they would be crawling out head first, but it would have to be done. They each dropped in turn, their landings surprisingly quiet, and luckily so. Below the catwalk, on the hanger floor below, Shadow Weaver, along with another woman in red who Adam didn't recognize, and at least two dozen Horde troopers strode purposefully into the large room. He hadn't been able to see them from his prior vantage point and it was a miracle that they hadn't been discovered already. He motioned for his companions to get down and the three of them positioned themselves flat in an effort to hide.

He could still see those below them through a small hole in the metal catwalk. Turning their attention toward the entrance of the hangar, the Horde members seemed to be expecting someone, or a group of people; dignitaries, perhaps? They hadn't yet noticed Adam and his companions, but there was no denying the fact that his group would be seen if they made any further moves. At least for the time being, they were trapped.



Having left the cell block they had started from far behind, Skeletor and his estranged family had nearly made it to the top of the tower already. Due to the Tribute going on in the main throne room, it would seem that security had been focused primarily around Hordak, and the hallways of the tower were largely empty. The half-Gar sorcerer felt his anger rising in accordance with each floor they ascended on their journey to Hordak's personal hangar. Catra should have already destroyed the device that was blocking his ability to tap into the magic that surrounded them. For whatever reason, whether failure on her part or betrayal, she obviously had not done so. Without his full magical power, he felt exposed, the so-called curse that allowed his body to rapidly heal no longer protecting him from injury or death. The armor provided by Despara would protect him to an extent, but without a weapon, he was at a severe disadvantage.

It angered Skeletor even more that Despara, whose trust he'd thought he'd earned, had obviously made a conscious choice not to arm him. Catra he had expected betrayal from, but he'd felt a connection growing between Despara and himself. A bond forged between two newly allied warriors. After all, it had been he who had told her the truth of her origins. It had been he who had set her free from her mental shackles. His brother carried a sword from Hordak's trophy room simply for sharing Despara's blood, yet Skeletor had nothing, despite his helping her. He hoped Randor knew well enough to assist him if it was necessary. Randor was a fool, but even the former Eternian king knew that without Skeletor's aid, he could be trapped here forever, and even that was only if he wasn't killed. Skeletor glared at both of his companions as they walked ahead of him.

Having walked through a series of doors, they had so far met no resistance. The Horde was busy with the Tribute. Even as Skeletor thought this,

he saw Despara come to a sudden stop ahead of him, tucking and rolling as blaster shots fired in her direction from the right side of the room. "Get down!" she shouted. Randor dove for cover behind a bank of computers, followed quickly by Skeletor.

"How am I supposed to block blaster fire with a sword?" Randor said with a curse.

"Give it to me," Skeletor answered. "You know how well I can handle a blade. I can block the shots with ease."

Randor shot him an incredulous look. "Do you think I'm an idiot?" Skeletor felt the heat of his anger rise even more, burning intensely as he watched Randor skillfully throw the sword at their mutual enemies. The weapon sliced through the air before sinking into the chest of one of the three Horde troopers shooting at them.

"And now we're both unarmed, you fool," Skeletor hissed.

Distracted by the felling of their comrade, the two remaining troopers were easy pickings for Despara, who stood up quickly from behind a stack of supplies and took them out with two rapid shots to the head. The blasts struck them expertly in the lenses of their helmets, the only part of their armor that was not protected against energy weapons.

"Allies have each other's trust, but only one of you has earned mine," Randor said as he stood and retrieved his weapon. Before Skeletor could respond, Despara approached them.

"Obviously word of my betrayal has spread," she said. "We need to move more cautiously now, but also with speed."

"How could they have learned already?" Randor asked. "I've not seen any recording devices."

Despara shot Skeletor a look, albeit only briefly. Still, it didn't escape the notice of the old sorcerer. "Catra knew of the plan, or at least the basics of it," she answered. Returning her gaze to her father, she continued. "Skeletor still cannot tap into his magic. I can only assume that she has chosen to betray him and has alerted the troops to our presence."

"Then it's only a matter of time before Hordak finds out as well," Randor said. "Your machinations have backfired yet again, brother. Only this time you've swept us up in your failure as well." He turned to face Skeletor, his face

red with anger. "You'll be the death of us before the end."

Skeletor seethed. "Come closer and I'll get it over with now."

"Stop this petty squabbling," Despara hissed. "We can't afford to be at each other's throats if we're going to survive this mess."

"Very well," Skeletor conceded, much to Randor's surprise. "We don't have far to go anyway. I suggest we move on."

Despara nodded in agreement before removing one of the troopers' torso armor and handing it to Randor, who quickly put it on over his tunic. The action of protecting her father with both a weapon and armor openly angered Skeletor, but she didn't care at this point. She just wanted to survive this ordeal in one piece. Despara walked through the next door, the two brothers falling in step behind her. They walked the rest of the way to the hangar in silence, with only two further skirmishes slowing them down. As they approached the hangar door, Despara walked to the keypad next to it and entered her personal code. It flashed red with a buzzing sound that could only mean her code had failed. "They've already locked me out," she said.

"What now?" Randor asked.

"Don't be too concerned," she said. "I have other means of opening it." She pulled the illegal scrambler from her belt. After it had worked its way through the decoding sequence, the door slid open. The three of them rushed into the hangar, but stopped suddenly as they saw Catra and more than two dozen elite armored troopers waiting for them, weapons at the ready. Turning back, Despara and the escapees couldn't make it back through the door in time before it slid shut with a thud that resounded with dreadful finality.

Looking back to the group that had blocked their path, Despara locked eyes with Catra. The woman in red stood at the forefront, having already positioned herself as The Horde's new Force Captain. It wasn't official, but it may as well have been. Despara was now an outsider. Her longtime competitor smiled wickedly. "Force Captain Despara," the woman said in a tone dripping with sarcasm, "wherever are you taking these two prisoners?" When Despara remained silent, Catra continued her prodding, obviously enjoying herself. "I see the human has a weapon. I can only assume that he took it and brought you here against your will. Or is something else happening here?"

The lips of Despara's mask turned downward in a frown. "Your voice has always been grating to my ears, Catra. Do them a favor and skip the part where

we talk and just get straight to where I kill you.”

Catra laughed. “Tough talk from someone so outnumbered. There is no escape, Traitor. You and your new allies will die here.”

“I highly doubt that,” Despara replied confidently.

“Stop this, my daughter.” The voice startled Despara, the sight of her adoptive mother even more so, passing through the group of troopers, who parted for her. “If you surrender now, you will spend the rest of your days in a cell, but I promise you that you will live. If you continue down this path, you will die.”

“I’d rather die in glorious fashion trying to save these these men than live in eternal servitude to Hordak,” Despara answered.

“Glory is of little use to the dead,” her mother replied. “Choose wisely.” She nodded to Catra and stepped back as the troopers rushed forward at Catra’s command, blasters firing.

Randor ducked and weaved through the blaster fire like a man half his age before engaging the nearest troops in combat with his sword. Despara shot at those closest to her with her blaster before being struck in the chest with a well-placed shot that sent her flying backward. Her armor protected her, but she was stunned by the impact nonetheless. She looked up to see Skeletor rushing to her side. Instead of checking her for possible injuries, he instead pulled one of her swords from its sheath and gripped it firmly in his blue-gray hands.

“I refuse to die like a dog,” he said angrily. He turned with a flourish of the weapon and blocked a dozen blaster shots with its blade, its movements a blur even to the enhanced vision that Despara’s mask provided. Despite not having his magic to call upon, she couldn’t help but be impressed at Skeletor’s natural power and skill. She gripped her blaster tighter and drew her other sword as she sprang to her feet with renewed spirit. Quickly sweeping the room with her eyes, she saw that Randor had eliminated two of the troopers and seemed to be holding his own against those closest to him. In the time it had taken her to scan the battle for her father, Skeletor had already amassed twice the body count of his younger half-brother, leaving four of the armored troops lying still in his wake.

Looking past the battles closest to her position, Despara saw Catra heading straight for her, an elaborately decorated sword gripped tightly in her right hand. Despara aimed her blaster only to have Catra’s sword knock it violently aside. She was quicker than Despara had expected. Her opponent

then swung for her neck but the blow was blocked by Despara's own sword. Both women smiled as their bladed weapons clashed for the first time. The two of them had never gotten along. This fight had been a long time coming.



Adam looked on in amazement as all hell broke loose below them and released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Down below was his father Randor, who Adam was seeing live for the first time in over a year. All throughout this journey, he'd thought of nothing but finding his father and saving him. Suddenly the moment was upon him, and he was nearly overwhelmed by the emotions surging through him. He didn't know who this Despara woman was, nor why she was helping his father escape along with Skeletor, especially if she was Force Captain of Hordak's army, but he had to count himself lucky that he and his allies would not have to make their way to the cells on the lower levels as they had originally planned. Whether by fate or simply luck, his father had come to him. He wasn't sure why Skeletor was with his father and the woman in black, but he didn't take the time to overanalyze the situation. He swung his right leg over the railing of the catwalk in an effort to join the fray and rescue his father, but felt a pair of hands grab at his tunic harshly, pulling him back to the floor of the walkway, high above the ensuing battle. "What in the blazes are you doing?" Kira 'Na yelled over the sound of blaster fire, no longer afraid of being seen as the chaos below them obviously had its participants otherwise occupied.

"We came all of this way to save my father," he angrily replied as he stood back up, frustrated with her for stopping him. "He needs my help."

"We agreed to help protect each other, Adam, not recklessly jump into a den of vipers. We don't know anything about what's going on," she said. "A wise warrior assesses the situation before heading into battle. Who is this Despara woman and why is she helping your father and Skeletor?"

"I'm not sure. Casta?" he asked, hopeful that the Etherian native would be more familiar with their apparent ally.

"I've never seen her before," she answered to his disappointment.

"And where is Keldor?" Kira 'Na asked, glancing around the field of battle

in an effort to pinpoint her old ally. "I don't see him."

Adam sighed as he turned to face her, his anger fading. He found it being replaced by a nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach. A proper time to admit to his lie regarding Keldor would never come. It was about time he came clean. "Keldor is Skeletor," he said. Adam felt a confused mix of emotions with the revelation. In some ways he felt relieved to have finally admitted it, yet at the same time he felt the sick feeling in his stomach grow, as if the lie had festered there all through their journey up until this point.

Though he witnessed a myriad of emotions play across her face, there was a long silence before Kira 'Na spoke again. "You lied to me," she accused, her voice rising in sync with her anger. She shoved at his chest with the Havok Staff. "All you ever really wanted was the Staff to journey here. You tricked me so that I'd let you use it."

Adam felt his eyes sting with shame as he confronted the truth. "I only lied to you because I could see no other way. I had to get here," he explained hurriedly. "I had to save my father. You wouldn't have let me use the staff. You'd left me no other choice. But it wasn't a complete lie," he pleaded. "You don't understand. Skeletor used to be Keldor before he changed. The man you once knew could still be in there somewhere. He could be redeemed. You could still save him."

She shook her head. "I have heard much about Skeletor over the years, as has every intelligent being on Tellus. Do you honestly believe that he can be saved, Adam?" Kira 'Na asked.

Her anger already seemed to be subsiding, but Adam couldn't help but hear the touch of sadness in her voice that took its place. She was right to feel betrayed. He had brought her here under false pretences. From here on out, he decided that she deserved the truth, and only the truth. "No," he answered quietly, his head dropping in defeat.

"I had thought you a friend, Adam, but you deceived me," she said solemnly. "I had also thought that you were a man of honor." She saw his eyes flick away from her gaze as she spoke. "Regardless of whether or not you understand the meaning of that word," she continued, "I do, so while you may have lost my respect, you still have my word. I will help you to free your father and the creature that Keldor has become. If Skeletor becomes a threat to our world once again, then it will be on your head."

Adam was thankful that the Dytherian woman was willing to continue the

mission, despite his actions. They'd already come so far. "I'm sorry, Kira 'Na, I..." he trailed off.

"I'm sorry if I'm being insensitive or missing something here," Casta interjected, "but if our mission is to rescue these men, or at least your father, wouldn't it be wise of us to join them in battle?"

Adam nodded. "This Despara. You know nothing of her at all?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "She wasn't around before my imprisonment."

"So she's a wildcard then?" Kira 'Na asked.

"Yes," Casta said. "And she seems to be of the same race as Hordak. Considering that, I wouldn't trust her as far as I could throw her. She may appear to be aiding your father and uncle, Adam, but I would keep a close eye on her."

"Agreed," he said simply as he dropped from the catwalk to the hangar floor below. Immediately locking his sights on his father, he slowly began to fight his way toward him.

■ ■ ■

The room was a cacophony of blaster fire and the clanging of swords. Despara gritted her teeth and leaned into Catra with a flurry of attacks. She was surprised to find that her opponent, despite her rather prissy attitude and attire, was well-trained in swordplay; much more so than the masked fighter would have expected. Catra parried and deflected Despara's blows with ease, which was no simple feat as Despara had trained nearly her entire life to be a warrior. She had no doubt, however, that she would win this battle. Catra was skilled, yes, but she was far removed from the front line, unlike Despara, who felt as if she'd been born in blood and raised in battle. It was only a matter of time before exertion took its toll on Catra's body and her reflexes slowed.

Despara dodged a downward swipe of Catra's sword by dropping and rolling to her right. Distracted by what appeared to be three new fighters, a man and two women, joining the fray on her and her allies' behalf, Despara only narrowly escaped Catra's next attack. Who were these newcomers, she wondered, and why were they attacking the troopers? They didn't look like

rebels, at least none that Despara had seen before. She felt her breath leave her body as she realized that the blond man was the other figure from her dreams, the one who always gave her the sword, which she would then use to run him through. Could this man be her long-lost brother that the Sorceress of Grayskull had spoken of? The look of joyous recognition on Randor's face would imply that it was. The man she assumed was her brother was making his way toward Randor in an effort to protect him. Good. It was one less thing she had to worry about. Despara again heard Catra's blade whiff by her head as she dodged. She shook her head in an attempt to gather herself. She couldn't be distracted by these new players. Not yet. She had to deal with the problem at hand first.

Leaping back up to her feet, Despara parried Catra's blade and pressed forward, once again on the offensive. Catra staggered and Despara sliced her sword horizontally toward the woman's neck. As Despara had predicted, Catra was finally growing fatigued due to the ongoing battle, blocking her attack clumsily with her own sword, but far too close to her blade's tip, which broke off as the weapons connected. Despara grinned. She had her now. Catra's eyes opened wide in shock as she leaned back and back flipped quickly and gracefully away in order to put some distance between them. "Your weapon is broken," Despara said, feeling victory was near, "are you sure you want to continue this fight, or would you rather run away like the coward that I know you are?"

Catra simply smiled as she pressed a button on the sword's ornate hilt. With a chorus of metallic clangs, the blade separated into dozens of different segments, each connected by a microfilament, causing the once solid blade to fall loosely to her side, now in the form of a bladed whip. The woman in red swung the weapon above her head in a flourish before cracking it with the loud clinking snap of metal on metal. "We've only just begun, Traitor."

23.

VICTORY AND SACRIFICE

Adam held his sword firmly in the short lull between opponents. As he looked around the room, he once again caught sight of his father, Randor. He was having trouble keeping track of the man amidst the chaos. Adam was overjoyed to see his father alive and well, as he'd last seen him locked in a cell in the vision Evelyn had shown him back in Zalesia. He was impressed that Randor seemed to have retained much of his fighting skills despite his imprisonment. His hair had grown long, and his beard thick, but he seemed to be healthy. Adam wondered what trials and tribulations his father had lived through and why this woman Despara was fighting alongside him, and more importantly, why Skeletor was as well.

His old enemy also seemed to be in good health. Moving quickly and with lightning fast reflexes as he battled the Horde troopers, Skeletor was in as fine a form as Adam had ever seen him. He also noticed that Skeletor wore a new armor that covered his torso. The Horde troopers were rarely able to score a blow on Skeletor but the ones that he took on his armor repaired themselves quickly. Whether the armor was a magical or scientific creation Adam did not know, but it was giving Skeletor an edge over his opponents.

Holding the Sword of Protection in front of him once again, the Spell Stone in the center of the blade glowed red and surrounded the Eternian king in a force field of energy to protect him from the coming barrage of blaster fire heading his way. As the blasts from the Horde weapons struck the energy field, their energy was absorbed harmlessly. Adam used the momentary distraction to his advantage, charging the troopers that had attacked him. There were three of them concentrating their fire on him as he ran toward them. He used the Sword of Protection to disable their weapons and put the troopers out of commission. Bolstered by Adam and his companions' arrival, his father and his allies were gaining the upper hand, despite being severely outnumbered. The Eternian king hoped that it was now only a matter of time before he and his father could reunite properly and he could extend the protection of the sword around him as well.

Continuing to scan the battle which now encompassed the entire hangar, Adam saw that Casta and Kira 'Na had their hands full, barely avoiding the Horde troopers' blaster fire. Kira 'Na fought bravely against the closest troopers with both her sword and the Havok Staff, a blur of motion. As far as Adam could tell, Skeletor had yet to lay eyes on his old weapon. Standing back to back with their Dytherian ally, Castaspella fought with vigor. She had appropriated a blaster rifle from one of the downed troopers and while Adam had to admit that she was doing well with it, he didn't understand why she wasn't using her magic. Looking back once more to his old foe Skeletor, Adam saw that he was not using magic either, sticking to the bladed weapon he carried instead. Something strange was going on. Why were these two beings, known for their sorcery, not using it to aid them in battle? He would have to get to the women, and soon, to protect them with the magic of his sword, which still seemed to work just fine. But then how would he protect his father? He was unable to reach a conclusion as his enemies' weapons trained on him once more. Regardless of their dwindling numbers, the Horde troopers were intent on either killing them or dying in the attempt.



Skeletor's blade whirled in a fury as he dispatched his armored foes. Although it was no Sword of Darkness, he had to admit that Despara's weapon was top-quality. Sharpened to a near diamond point, the sword passed through the Horde troopers' armor with little effort. Upon the swift end of the latest to

attack him, Skeletor turned and stopped, shocked to recognize a face he hadn't seen in many years. The red headed warrior fought with the fury of a much younger woman, clutching his own precious Havok Staff in her hand. He was almost as surprised to see the familiar weapon as he was Kira 'Na, a ghost from Keldor's past that he had never expected to encounter again. Normally upon such a reunion, Skeletor would've felt annoyance, but the flicker of his old self within him smiled. He willed the feeling to the back of his mind as he made his way toward her and her brightly attired companion. As the Horde trooper engaging her in battle fell in a heap, the warrior woman turned and nodded to Skeletor in greeting. "What in the worlds are you doing here?" he asked gruffly.

"Trying to save your hide," she answered, "although if I had known you had grown to become the bane of Tellus, I would have let you rot here."

He gazed at her curiously. "So then why are you here? Why do you continue to fight?"

"The answer to the first question is that your nephew over there told me that I would be helping to free my old ally Keldor," she said. "He made no mention of your change."

Skeletor was surprised. "He lied to you? I'm impressed. I didn't think he had it in him."

"Perhaps you have more in common with each other than you thought," she said glibly. "I continue to fight because I've come too far to give up now. As it turns out, you may need more than just one form of saving."

"Is that so?" Skeletor replied with a laugh as the remaining troopers regrouped.

Kira 'Na eyed the troopers as they advanced upon them. "Three-to-one. Just like old times in Arkonus's slave pit."

He scoffed. "It was six-to-one when the battle started and I took out most of them myself, so I guess you're right."

Despite the drastic change in his appearance, the cockiness Kira 'Na remembered was still there. She couldn't help but smile.

■ ■ ■

Despara ducked as Catra's bladed whip sliced through the air above her head. Despite her years of training, Despara was ill-equipped to defend against Catra's strange new weapon, now twice as long it had been, giving Catra even more reach than she'd had before. Despara had never seen anything quite like it in her travels. The sword, now segmented into many blades, hissed through the air. She was barely managing to dodge its attacks. Occasionally it would make a loud cracking sound as Catra pulled it back toward her with a smile, readying for the next attempt, certain that it was only a matter of time before she won. Their battle had ironically become a game of cat and mouse as Despara worked to avoid Catra's whirling blades. She couldn't get close enough to attack. As the weapon came around for another pass, Despara knew that she would not be able to avoid it this time. It was coming in too quickly. Instead she raised her sword to block it, but her enemy's weapon merely wrapped around her blade, yanking it free from her grasp.

"It looks like you've lost after all, Traitor. If you give up now I promise to make your death quick," Catra said, a wicked smile spreading across her face.

"I don't give up that easily," Despara answered defiantly. "Your weapon was a trick well played, but this really is just playing to you. To me, it's just what I do. You may own a unique weapon, Catra, but I am a weapon." As Catra's whip made another pass through the air, Despara raised her right arm. When she did so, the blades wrapped around her forearm, cutting sharply into the armor Hordak had made her. To her surprise, the armor held, but just barely. She gripped the blades tightly in her right hand and pulled them toward her with all the force that she could manage. Catra stumbled forward, taken aback by the daring move, which must have seemed almost suicidal in her eyes. Before the woman in red could defend herself, Despara cocked back her left hand and thrust it forward into Catra's high cheekbone, knocking her unconscious, falling in a heap at Despara's feet. Looking down at her opponent, Despara felt little joy in her victory. If she and her companions were going to escape this place alive, they still had a long way to go.

Glancing about the room, she saw that many of the Horde troopers had fallen. What few were left were making a hasty retreat, recognizing that they were outmatched by their strange assemblage of enemies. Shadow Weaver was nowhere to be found. Despara watched as her fellow warriors gathered in the center of the hangar and a long embrace was shared between Randor and the blond man she now knew must be her twin brother Adam. She had been told he could move mountains. She wasn't impressed. Seeing him, she remembered

the Sorceress' ominous final words to her. Someone was destined to die here due to her choice. She had betrayed Hordak. If the Sorceress was right, the decision had doomed one of these people. The thought sent a cold chill down her spine. She approached her father and brother cautiously until she was close enough to hear them.

"By the gods, Son, how did you ever manage to wind up here?" Randor asked, a smile on his face that he couldn't control as he held his son close.

"That is indeed a very long story, father, but I'm thrilled to see you alive and well," Adam answered as he pulled away, "though I can't say the same for everyone present here," he indicated Skeletor as he spoke.

"As much as I am loath to admit it, Skeletor did his part," Randor said, "and we need him if we're going to escape alive. We're not out of this yet. Hordak has a device that somehow shuts down the use of magic within the Fright Zone."

"That explains a lot," Adam said, "but it's a problem. We used the Havok Staff to get here thinking that we would be able use it to return as well. According to what you're telling me, that's not possible."

Randor shook his head. "No, but we have another means of escape: a device that Despara stole from Hordak."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Adam asked.

"I was just about to ask her," Randor said, nodding in Despara's direction.

With that, Despara walked closer and spoke up for the first time. She eyed Adam curiously, but did not yet know what to make of him. "We need Skeletor to operate the key, but it appears he is otherwise occupied." The three of them, now joined by Castaspella, turned in unison to see Skeletor speaking heatedly with Kira 'Na. Their conversation was becoming clearer as their voices raised.

"You were a good man once," Kira 'Na said to the skull-faced sorcerer. "How did you come to be one of Tellus's most reviled?"

"Power always comes with a price," he answered.

"But you were not always about power," she countered. "You merely sought to retake what was yours. To make things right."

"Life seldom plays out as we expect it to," he said.

“No, but it is never too late to right its course,” she replied.

“You're wasting your time,” Randor said as he approached them, “if even his own brother cannot save him, what good can you do?”

The warrior woman from the North looked in his direction and narrowed her eyes. “The difference, Eternian, is that I believe it can be done.”

“Enough with this nonsense,” Skeletor said. “Where's the Key?”

“I have it,” Despara answered. “I suggest we leave now.”

“It won't work,” Skeletor responded. “I still cannot tap into the magic that surrounds us. Catra would have destroyed the machine that prevents my access to it, but she betrayed me, so we need to keep moving until we are free of the Fright Zone and the influence of Hordak's device.”

“I don't think so,” a voice hissed from out of the darkness. The group all turned to see the sorceress in red emerge from the shadows of a large carrier ship.

“Shadow Weaver!” Castaspella exclaimed, stepping forward with her ceremonial knife at the ready.

“None other, old friend,” her enemy responded. If she was surprised to see Castaspella, it didn't show, her features hidden by her hood as they always were. Turning to face her adoptive daughter, Shadow Weaver spoke in a commanding voice. “I agree with Skeletor. Enough of this nonsense, Despara. You have obviously made your choice. Give up, all of you, and I will grant you each a swift death. My magic is not hampered here, as yours is. If you continue this futile battle, you will all die.”

Despara shook her head. “I'm sorry, Mother, but you're right. I have made my choice. Your blind devotion to Hordak and his ravings is all too clear to me now. You are as mad as he is.”

“Insolent child!” Shadow Weaver shouted. “Ungrateful whelp! You, whom he chose above all others to be his heir. You, above all others, whom he would call his very own daughter. How dare you insult your father?”

“Even now you lie. Hordak would never make me his heir. I was never anything to him but a reservoir for the blood he needed to complete his spell,” Despara answered defiantly. “More than that, he has never been my father.” Reaching up, she unclasped her mask's connectors, lifting it over her head to reveal her true face beneath, before dropping it forcefully to the ground at her

feet. "I am Princess Adora of the House of Randor, and I will never again bow to you, Hordak, or anyone who wears the crest of The Horde."

Shadow Weaver's face remained unreadable, but her anger was palpable, manifesting itself in the crackling electricity that began to envelop her entire body. "And so you are," she paused, "and so you have chosen death!" The sorceress raised her hands, unleashing powerful red lightning upon them.

Adam gasped as he witnessed the exchange. His first impulse was to think that it was a lie, but when he saw how his father looked at her, he immediately knew that it was true. The pride on Randor's face was undeniable as Adora defied the woman who had pretended to be her mother. Adam had never expected to find Adora here, although knowing that this woman Despara was actually his stolen twin explained much of what was happening and why she was helping them. What he couldn't explain was how she seemed so young. She didn't appear to be a day over seventeen. It was then that he realized that time must indeed function very differently in the two dimensions. He panicked as his line of thinking continued. Teela was pregnant with their child. How long had he truly been away? Would he return in time for the birth? He forced his thoughts back to the present as he saw the Horde witch react to his sister's declaration, the red lightning nearly engulfing them before Adam raised the Sword of Protection, which once again shielded them. Now that he knew that they had no magic to aid them, he wondered how it was that the sword continued to operate. Perhaps there was more science to the stone than he had ever expected.

"You fools!" Shadow Weaver exclaimed, seeing how the Stone of Protection had saved them. "Your trinkets won't save you." She glided toward them, moving quickly and entering the sword's protective sphere before Adam could react. With a wave of her hands, he felt the sword slip through his fingers, torn from his grasp so suddenly that he had no defense. He could only watch helplessly as it clattered on the floor across the hangar. With another simple gesture from the Horde witch, the Havok Staff was wrenched from Kira 'Na's grasp and shattered into a dozen pieces before them. Adam's heart sank as he realized he'd never be able to fulfill his promise of returning it to Evelyn. She'd want to kill him, but if Skeletor couldn't operate the Cosmic Key as he'd promised, it didn't matter. The Key and Skeletor were now their only means of escape. "Nothing can save you now," the sorceress raged, raising her hands and clapping them. Adam felt a sharp tug as he and his companions were thrown together in a heap. Throwing her hands outward, Shadow Weaver then sent them all flying away from each other, leaving them scattered about the hangar.

Directing her fury toward her adopted daughter, Shadow Weaver drew Adora in sharply with her magic. Suspended in front of her, Adora was brutally attacked by dozens of tearing claws and fangs that emerged from shadowy pools which had spread across the floor beneath her feet. Although her armor shielded Adora from physical attacks, the magical nature of the blows caused her to feel every bit as much pain as she would have had she been totally unprotected. Strong as she was, she did not cry out, despite her pain.

Seeing his daughter's plight, Randor struggled to his feet and rushed the Horde witch, his sword gripped firmly in his right hand. Shadow Weaver's eyes flicked in his direction seconds before he felt an invisible blow to his chest that did more than simply stop him in his tracks; it sent him flying back twenty feet to a rough landing amidst a pile of dead troopers that had fallen to Skeletor's blade. He fought to rise once more, but the troopers' corpses floated above him before crashing down, burying him beneath their heavy armor.

Likewise, Kira 'Na and Castaspella attacked, but were met with similar defeats. Adam dove for his sword, which lay a short distance from where he had landed from Shadow Weaver's previous attack, but the weapon slid away, even further out of his reach. He felt his legs give out from under him and before he recognized what was happening, he was hurtling through the air, landing on the catwalk high above.

Adora, no longer able to bear the pain of Shadow Weaver's attacks, cried out for the first time as Skeletor rose to his feet, her blood-curdling scream a haunting sound that none of them would soon forget. The skull-faced sorcerer seethed as he witnessed Shadow Weaver drawing on the magic that surrounded them, while he himself was unable to. Nevertheless, he stood strong, reminding himself of what he'd told Hordak earlier that same evening: that his strength came not from his magic, but from his will, and that was something The Horde would never be able to take from him again. Despite his best efforts to not care for his niece, her pain angered him. Shadow Weaver preventing their escape angered him. Her destroying the Havok Staff angered him. More than anything else, his shame at having been imprisoned here on Etheria like a common enemy filled him with fury. He would make sure The Horde never thought of him as common again. After today, his name would once again be feared throughout these halls, only spoken by those who dared to whisper it.

He clutched his niece's sword only lightly, flipping and spinning it nonchalantly as he approached the Horde witch. He wanted her to know that he was not afraid of her, that he was more powerful than her, even without his magic. It was his conviction in this that would grant him victory. He knew more

than anyone here that magic itself was an act of will, and Shadow Weaver had little will of her own, having long ago sworn herself to her master. Realizing the danger that approached her, Shadow Weaver ceased her attack on Adora, flinging the girl aside to tumble through the air like a child's doll before crashing to the floor in a heap. Skeletor didn't look at her. Instead, he continued to stare intently at Shadow Weaver, who raised her hands and sent a blast of red lightning toward him. It struck him in the chest, but his advanced prototype armor protected him from the brunt of it, deflecting it away like a shield. Still, much of the energy jolted his body and smoke began to waft from him as his pale blue flesh blistered and burned beneath the chest plate, which had grown hot from the attack. He gritted his teeth in pain as he continued his methodical approach, never once removing his gaze from Shadow Weaver's shrouded face.

"You fool!" she shouted at him. "Without your magic, you are powerless! I will destroy you once and for all!"

"My will," he paused, reeling from the attack, "is more powerful than your magic could ever be." He continued to glare at her as he slowly made his way toward her, step by agonizing step. She began walking backward before her retreat was blocked by a large ship, which she backed into suddenly, her eyes darting about like a cornered animal. "I remember when you were younger and full of ambition," Skeletor continued, his voice full of pain, "but your will has long since been supplanted by Hordak's. This makes you weak." As he came face-to-face with the woman, he wrapped his left hand around her neck and squeezed gently. "And now you are nothing but a shell." She ceased her attack, knowing the battle was over.

"Now what?" she wheezed. Without answering, Skeletor struck the side of her head with the hilt of his sword, knocking her unconscious.

Enraged by Adora's suffering at Shadow Weaver's hands, Randor called out from beneath the pile of troopers as Adam helped free him. "Why didn't you kill her?"

"Hordak thinks that he is a god, that he's unstoppable. He needs to know what happened here," Skeletor replied. "Not just see the aftermath, but to hear what happened from his most trusted follower. He needs to remember that The Horde can lose." The sorcerer sank to his knees with an audible groan, the agony of Shadow Weaver's attack finally overwhelming him. With a grunt of pain, Skeletor removed his prototype armor, which was now destroyed. It cracked and fell to the floor, exposing his blistered and burned skin beneath. Adora, at least somewhat recovered, limped her way to his side. Randor and

Adam looked on in shock as she helped Skeletor to his feet, the two former enemies mutually supporting each other as they made their way toward Randor and the others.

Kira 'Na approached Skeletor and smiled. "I knew there was good in you."

"Good?" he asked with pained laugh. "More like stubbornness. Don't forget, woman that we still need to escape the Fright Zone. I merely did what had to be done to save myself."

"Say whatever you need to convince yourself, Skeletor, but I saw your reaction to her pain," she said, indicating Adora, who still held him close, the both of them continuing to support each other's weight. "You reacted as Keldor would have, not as this monstrosity you've become."

"Believe what you like," he scoffed. "It makes no difference to me."

"I hate to cut this exchange short, but I'm afraid I have my own mission to complete," Castaspella said as she approached Shadow Weaver with the ceremonial knife she had brought. She intended to take away her old friend's magic, even if it cost the woman her life.

"Do it," Adora said.

"I told you we need her alive," Skeletor interjected.

"I don't answer to you, Sorcerer," Castaspella said. "I have to drive this into her heart. I need to avenge our master. I would never normally do something like this, but it's the only way to stop her. Similar to Kira 'Na's mission, it is a debt of honor."

Kira 'Na shook her head. "There is no honor in killing a defenseless enemy. She is defeated. That is revenge enough. Killing her now would simply make you like her."

"But she deserves it," Adora said. "She lied to me right until the end. More than that, her blind devotion to Hordak has killed thousands, if not more. She needs to die."

Casta looked into the girl's eyes and contemplated her course of action. "Does she?" She moved closer to Shadow Weaver's unconscious form, unsure of what to do. "I don't know exactly what Hordak did to her. Maybe he twisted her, as he did you?" Castaspella gazed at the woman she had once been so close to, her hand trembling as she raised the knife. After a long moment, she let out a loud sigh and lowered her weapon. "I'm sorry, Norwyn," she said aloud. "I

thought I'd be strong enough to do it, but I can't. She was my friend once. I can't just take her life. I should have known that I wouldn't be strong enough."

"On the contrary," Adam said, "I think your master would be proud of you."

"But she's evil!" Adora protested.

"So were you, not so long ago," Casta argued. "How many have died at your hand for the glory of The Horde? You are young, child, and you still feel the sting of hatred from Shadow Weaver's deception. Forgiveness is not something you can comprehend at this moment, but in time you will understand. One day you will forgive me."

A rustle of cloth caught Casta's attention as Shadow Weaver stirred. "Spare me your pity, Castaspella," the Horde witch hissed from her position on the floor. "You are a fool. You've never understood true power and you never will."

"How much power do you think Hordak will leave you when he finds out you failed?" Castaspella retorted.

"More than enough to stop you and your rebel friends," Shadow Weaver said as she quickly levitated off of the floor, righting herself in the process. "You've aged well, but you've never been a threat to me." Using her magic to cast Castaspella aside violently, Shadow Weaver caught sight of the knife clattering to the floor. She laughed and gave the group of warriors a cold stare. "You may have won this battle, but the war is far from over." She eyed Skeletor gravely before calling Castaspella's knife to her, hovering it in the air, its blade pointed toward them. "So this was to be the instrument of my death?" she asked. "Let's not let its journey here be in vain. Skeletor," she said, calling to him. "You have deceived my daughter and turned her against me. You have stolen her from me! I may have failed to stop Despara from leaving, but your death will be my redemption." With that, the knife shot out in Skeletor's direction. No longer protected by his nanomite armor, the blade meant sure death, his body vulnerable here in the Fright Zone where his regenerative abilities were gone. Before the knife could strike him, Kira 'Na leapt in front of the flying blade, which pierced her chest with a sickening thump. Her companions all looked on in shock, unable to stop what was happening. By the time they glanced back to Shadow Weaver, she was gone, a wisp of smoke whirling where she had been mere seconds before. Adora shuddered as she witnessed the Sorceress of Grayskull's prediction made manifest before her eyes, all while she remained powerless to stop it.

Skeletor stepped away from her and knelt down beside Kira 'Na, his old ally, and held her head up as he spoke. "Why? Why save me?" he asked her.

"Keldor once saved me," she said in a soft, labored voice that only he could hear. "I hope now to save him, as I had originally set out to do."

"Keldor is dead," he said, "and long gone."

"No," she paused. "He's not. I don't believe that. Keldor still lives within you. No matter how deep or hidden he may be, you can find him again."

"Why would I want to do such a thing?" he asked.

"Because the Keldor I knew cared strongly for his legacy," she answered. "All I have heard of Skeletor is his lust for power."

"And?"

"Power makes for a weak legacy, Keldor. When you die, your power dies with you." Blood began to seep from her mouth as she spoke her final words. "There is something to be said for an honorable life, for a legacy worth leaving." She gripped his cold hand tightly. "A Dytherian warrior can only enter the great halls with a glorious death and a death cannot be glorious if it means nothing. Don't prove me a fool. Don't let my sacrifice be in vain." He looked on, waiting for her to say more, but her eyes stared through him now, to something beyond. Her grip on his hand loosened and he felt her breath leave her body for the last time.

Skeletor removed the blade from her chest and cast it aside as he rose, cradling her lifeless body in his arms, and walked slowly toward the others. He glanced toward the group he'd fought alongside and scoffed audibly. They had not heard his conversation with Kira 'Na, but he could see in their eyes that they were saddened by her death. Each of them looked at him expectantly. He felt as if they felt sorry for him. "What are you all staring at?" he asked. "She's dead." He paused, turning away from their prying eyes, "And we will be too if we don't get moving."

24.

HOME COMING

The five warriors emerged from the tunnels through which Adam and his companions had originally entered the Fright Zone. Despite Skeletor's prior urgings of haste, the sorcerer had taken the time to carefully maneuver Kira 'Na's body through the narrow ducts during their escape. It was unlikely that Adam would have left her behind, but the fact that it was Skeletor who insisted on bringing her surprised him. Still, Adam couldn't help but feel the emptiness of regret gnawing at him. If he hadn't lied to Kira 'Na, she would still be alive and that painful knowledge would stick with him for the rest of his days; an everlasting regret, but one that had already taught him much. Before leaving the hangar, Adora had told him that she'd originally planned to steal a ship, but their surprise ambush had ended that possibility. He had suggested returning the way that he and his allies had arrived. Thankfully, The Horde must not have deduced how Adam and his group had entered, for they had had no further incidents. It was one small stroke of luck amidst the chaos of their escape. Alarms could be heard blaring throughout the Horde capital as Hordak was now no doubt aware that his two prisoners, along with his adopted daughter and the Cosmic Key, were gone. The Eternian King felt a drop of sweat run down his forehead, causing him to wipe his brow with the sleeve of his tunic. He'd been on difficult missions before,

but few had been as dangerous as this one. However, he felt a surge of pride in its success, especially without having had the power of He-Man to aid him. Glancing toward Randor, Adam couldn't help but smile, both at the joy of having saved his father, but also because the older man had no idea that he was about to become a grandfather. Thinking of Teela back home on Tellus, Adam was reminded that his mission wasn't over. He still had a long way to go to get home and back to the rest of his family.

Castaspella was the first to speak as they hit the edge of the Dark Forest, the alarms now sounding distant behind them. "I must return to the Rebels and warn them. Hordak's fury over this is not likely to subside anytime soon. It would be best if they laid low for a while."

Adora nodded in agreement. "Hordak will be even more vigilant in rooting out the Rebels now. He'll probably burn this entire forest to cinders."

"How do you know?" Castaspella asked.

"Because it's what I would do," she answered. She turned to her uncle. "Skeletor, we need to warn them."

"I owe them nothing," he said coldly. "They can fend for themselves."

"I am up to the task, Adora," Casta interjected. "They aren't far from here, and you must hurry."

"Alright," Adora conceded. "Would you do me a favor?" she asked.

"Of course," Casta replied with a nod.

"Keep my identity a secret," she said. "As far as I'm concerned, Despara died back in that battle."

"I will," the sorceress from Mystacor said. "Will you ever return to Etheria?"

Adora looked at her father and brother before she answered. "That is a valid question, but I'm afraid I have too many of my own that I need to have answered first."

Casta nodded. "I more than understand. Just as I need to find my place in the world, you must find yours. I wish you luck."

"Thank you," Adora replied.

"I also have a request," Adam said. "Tell them I thank them once again for

helping me find my father, and now, much to my surprise, my sister as well.” He did not mention his uncle.

“I will,” she said in response. “I’m sorry for the loss of your friend. If I hadn’t brought that knife—”

“Shadow Weaver would have just used something else,” Adam finished for her. “It wasn’t your fault.” *If it was anyone’s, it was mine*, he thought.

Casta glanced toward Skeletor, who merely stared in her direction, Kira ‘Na’s lifeless body resting over his shoulder. His skull was unreadable; however with the slight tinge of magic she had begun to feel as they got further away from Hordak’s tower, she could sense his hatred. She wondered if his aura always felt that way to other magic users, or if the emotion was being directed toward her specifically. She didn’t want to find out. With a simple nod to the sorcerer and Randor, she turned and began walking.

Adam called after her as she made her way deeper into the Dark Forest. “Good journey, Castaspella.”

She turned back briefly. “Good journey, King Adam.”

Skeletor pushed his way past Adora, Adam and Randor, making his way farther away from the Fright Zone. “If you’ve all finished with your heartfelt goodbyes, I’ll remind you that we need to keep moving. I can feel a touch of magic here, but it’s still not enough to operate the Key. If you want to escape before Hordak unleashes his wrath upon this world, now is the time.”

Adora could sense the pain he felt at his old friend’s death, whose body he carried with great care, but she said nothing. They needed Skeletor to operate the Cosmic Key and she didn’t want to risk turning him against them once more. Their alliance was tenuous at best and she knew it, so she did nothing to comfort him. Instead, she walked next to him in silence as they made their way further into the Dark Forest, Adam and Randor not far behind, speaking quietly between themselves.

■ ■ ■

Upon reaching the edge of the Dark Forest, the four of them entered a

clearing where Skeletor could see the floating city of Mystacor in the sky above them. He'd slowly begun feeling the magical aura of Etheria the further they got away from Hordak's tower. It was finally strong enough that he could operate the Cosmic Key. Although Etheria's magic had allowed some of his strength to return, he was still in intense pain and the weight of Kira 'Na's corpse pressed down on him harshly. She was either growing heavier, or he was growing weaker due to his injuries, and the answer to that question was obvious. He needed the magic of Tellus to heal him. He needed to return home. Skeletor laid Kira 'Na's body gently on the ground and turned toward Adora, reaching out his hand. "Here is where we will do it. Give me the Key."

"How do we know you won't betray us?" Randor asked accusingly.

Skeletor's eye sockets blazed red. "You don't, but without me you won't be going anywhere at all. You're more than welcome to die here, if that is your wish."

"It's alright, Father," Adora said. "I know you find it hard to believe, but I trust him." She reached to the back of her belt and removed the Key from the link that held it there. It was surprisingly unscathed from their battle and had been the first thing she'd checked as they had made their way out of the hangar earlier. Skeletor carefully took the Key from her grasp.

"At last," he said. Turning away from the three who stood with him, he began deliberately depressing specific buttons on the Key, each press causing the device to emit a loud tone.

All combined, the tones made up a part of the tune that Adora remembered from her childhood. She realized then that Tellus, the world they would be travelling to, was the center of the universe that Hordak had been searching for, and was probably the worst place to be taking the Key. She shook the thought from her mind as the forked prongs atop the Cosmic Key spread out and began to rotate. Soon, the familiar lights she had once seen in front of her ship emitted from the crest of the Key and a large swirling portal opened in front of them.

Without turning back to look at the others, Skeletor picked up Kira 'Na's body once more, resting it over his shoulder. "You must be quick," he said as he jumped into the portal. Adora looked to Randor and Adam and motioned for them to follow. After Randor had entered, followed closely by Adam, she jumped in herself.



Skeletor landed hard on a grassy field, but he managed to retain his footing, protecting Kira 'Na's body from further harm. He rested it on the ground as the portal continued swirling in the air two meters above and behind him. Randor quickly came through, along with Adam, who had made sure that his father had gone before him. Adora soon followed. Skeletor breathed in deep as he felt the powerful magic of Tellus once again flow through him. It was stronger than he remembered. Skeletor realized, in fact, that he now felt more powerful than he ever had. Perhaps he wouldn't miss his Havok Staff so much after all. He gasped in relief as his wounds healed; the Sorceress of Grayskull's spell once again in effect. He didn't recognize exactly where he was, but due to the grasses, he assumed it must be on the Light Hemisphere. The sorcerer turned and handed the Cosmic Key to Adora. He alone knew that if Hordak had another, say a prototype of some kind, he could follow this one's energy signatures here. Due to this, Skeletor was more than willing to give the Key up. In fact, he wanted to be as far away from it as possible. After she removed it from his grasp, he spread his arms wide and laughed, Tellus's power surging through him. "It feels good to be home."

"For once, we agree," Randor said, happy to feel the earthen ground of Tellus beneath his boots; something he never thought he'd experience again after months of nothing but the hard floor of his cell.

Adam approached Skeletor calmly, but the sorcerer saw that the Eternian King still held his sword tightly. "Where does this leave us?" the young king asked.

Skeletor's expressionless skull stared at him before answering. "You tell me. I suppose that now, free from Hordak's magic-blocking device, you will transform into He-Man and attempt to capture me."

Adam shook his head. "I'm not looking for a fight, especially after having had your help in escaping."

Skeletor continued to stare at him, cocking his head to the side in amused thought. He glanced down at the sword in Adam's hand, finally really seeing it for the first time since Adam and his allies had joined the battle. The sword had

changed, and Skeletor now recognized that fact. The skull-faced sorcerer grinned before kicking Adam with such suddenness that the king had no defense. He flew back, landing harshly in the grass. "Get up," Skeletor commanded. "Get up and fight me."

"What are you doing?!" Adora shouted at him.

"Silence!" he shouted back. He turned to Randor and his daughter before pointing at them both with his outstretched hand. Before either of them could react, they were frozen in place due to Skeletor's spell of immovability. Turning back to Adam, he approached his old enemy methodically. "Get up, King, and fight."

Adam scrambled to his feet, sweat beading on his forehead as he faced Skeletor, knowing that, for the first time, he was wholly outmatched. Nonetheless, he raised the Sword of Protection and took a defensive stance.

Skeletor laughed. "Well?" he asked. "Transform!" He spread his arms wide. "Come and get me! Become the mighty He-Man and embarrass me once more, for old time's sake!"

Adam stood firm. "If you're going to fight me, then do it," he said in as commanding a tone as he could manage. He couldn't help but think of his wife, Teela, and the child they were due to have at any time. He thought of his father, whom he'd just now gotten back after a long year without him. Lastly, he thought of his sister, whom he hadn't even been properly introduced to yet. No matter, he would fight if he had to. He would always stand up to Skeletor, no matter the cost.

Skeletor laughed, lowering his arms. "You can't do it, can you?" He paused, gazing intently at the Eternian King. "It wasn't the magic damper that caused you to fight as you are. For whatever reason, you can't become He-Man at all anymore, can you? The power of Grayskull has left you."

Adam remained in his defensive stance, sword raised. "You're right, but He-Man or not, I will fight you to the end. I would die to protect my family from you."

Skeletor cackled loudly. "You have no idea how much this amuses me. I now feel more powerful than I ever have before. Meanwhile, you have become weak and pathetic. What makes you think that I care about your family anymore? Your kingdom?" He laughed once more. "As He-Man, you were my equal. As Adam, you are beneath me, more so now than ever. You are no more

worrisome to my plans than an ant is to the plans of architects. All He-Man ever was to me was an obstacle, and with him gone, I can finally ascend to true power. Grayskull is mine!" Skeletor turned and began to walk away from them.

"Do you not hear yourself? You sound as mad as Hordak," Adora said angrily. "You don't want to follow that path, and you know it," she reasoned. "I've seen your true self, and it is not this!"

"Don't presume that you know anything about me, girl," Skeletor responded. "I showed you what you wanted to see."

"I don't believe that," she said.

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you," Skeletor replied as he knelt down to pick up Kira 'Na's body before placing it upon his shoulder. Without another word, he began to walk away from them.

"Then why do you still carry the body of your friend?" Adora argued. "Skeletor wouldn't care about her. To him, she would just be collateral damage." He didn't answer, continuing to leave them behind.

"Are you mad, or just a fool?!" Adam shouted after him.

Skeletor spun around, pointing at Adam with his free hand in anger. "You dare call me a fool? You, who can't even protect yourself?!"

"You say you want Grayskull?" Adam asked.

"Yes, of course," Skeletor replied. "And I will have it. The power will be mine at last."

Adam gestured to a cliff not far from where they stood. "Fine. You want it? It's yours."

Skeletor looked in the direction Adam pointed, but saw nothing but tall grasses blowing in the gentle breeze. "What are you going on about?"

"Don't you recognize where you are, Skeletor? The rubble from the Mystic Wall that surrounds us?" Adam asked. "We are at the border between the hemispheres. With your half of the Power Sword and mine, I brought balance to Tellus, nearly a year ago. That spot is where Castle Grayskull once stood." He gestured to the gaping chasm once more, raising his voice. "It's gone, Skeletor! You have nothing left to fight for!"

Skeletor walked to the edge of the cliff, recognition setting in. He

recognized the familiar landscape where many a battle had been fought between them, the solitary peak where Grayskull once stood in its ancient glory. It was true. Castle Grayskull was gone, and with it, Skeletor's life's purpose. He sank to his knees in the grasses, saying nothing. Kira 'Na's body slid to the ground.

Some distance away, Randor and Adora found that they were free from the sorcerer's spell and walked to where Adam stood in silence, his enemy defeated with words alone. Randor was the first to speak. "Is it true, Son? He-Man is no more? How will we protect ourselves from Skeletor, especially now that he is more powerful than ever?"

"It is true," Adam admitted, "but with Grayskull gone, we may not have anything to protect other than our kingdom and our loved ones and he claims to care little about either of those."

"Can we trust that that will remain the case?" Randor asked.

Adam shook his head. "I don't know. It's no Mystic Wall, but it is something. Only time will tell, I suppose. Either way, with the help of our friends and allies, if he ever does attack, we will be ready for him."

"I pray that that's true," Randor said.

Adora smiled weakly at the two of them before walking toward where Skeletor knelt at the edge of the chasm. She didn't understand their connection, but she didn't fear the sorcerer as Adam and Randor did. She had seen something within him, a view into his soul that she suspected he allowed few to see, if anyone at all. There was ambition there, but regret as well. He would deny it, of course, but she sensed that there was more to him. The newly returned Eternian princess placed her right hand gingerly on the sorcerer's left shoulder.

"Leave me," was all he said, his voice so low that she could barely hear him.

"Where will you go?" she asked quietly.

Skeletor's eye sockets blazed red with fury as he remembered the catalyst that had caused all of this to happen. "Far away from you and yours. It turns out I have business to attend to, after all. I am not an honorable man, Adora, but I have a debt of honor to pay, nonetheless. I will return Kira 'Na to her home. After that, I have an old friend to visit who will pay for her betrayal." He stood and picked up Kira 'Na once more, nodding a farewell. "I hope you find what it is you seek."

She nodded in return. "I wish the same for you."

His jaw lowered in a mock-smile. "Oh, I will, my dear. I most definitely will." He turned and began walking into the distance. "I know where she lives."

As he left, Adora returned to where Adam and Randor were talking, rapidly trying to catch up on a year of Eternian time that her father had lost. Apparently, time functioned quite differently here, as her brother, supposedly her twin, appeared to be at least a decade older than her. In a way, she was thankful. Her relative youth gave her more time to learn how to be Adora, no longer hiding behind Despara's mask. It was almost like a gift: ten extra years away from Hordak's hold. Perhaps she could find happiness after all. Perhaps they all could.

"A son?!" she heard Randor exclaim as she approached. "I'm going to be a grandfather?"

"Yes, father, but we must hurry. There's no telling how long we've been gone in Eternian time. I just hope we haven't missed his birth!" Adam reached into a pouch on his belt and removed the communicator he'd taken with him. It had been useless on Etheria, but now that he had returned home to Tellus, he could finally hear his wife's voice again.

As he operated the device, a small image of a reddish-blond woman emerged from it. "Adam?!" Teela exclaimed. "You're finally home!"

"Yes, my love. I have father and," he paused, "well, let's just say it's a surprise who else I found."

"You'd better get here soon, you dolt!" he heard Duncan shout. "She's heading into the birthing hospital as we speak!"

After a moment of stunned silence from Adam, Randor spoke up, edging into sight of the device's viewer. "Then you'd better send us some transportation, old friend. We're a little stranded!" The two soon-to-be grandfathers laughed as Adam went white as a ghost. Adora smiled and hugged her father and brother for the first time, happy for them, while silently hoping that she would be able to find her own happiness here on this strange planet she would now call home.

25.

A PRICE TO BE PAID

Evelyn awoke groggily. The Zalesian temple she called home felt colder than usual. Not seeing the familiar flicker of her nightly fire, she thought it had gone out. She opened her eyes to inspect it, but found herself surrounded by a darkness so complete that she had to illuminate her orbed staff in order to see anything at all. Glancing toward where the fire normally glowed brightly, she realized that it wasn't out at all, but rather was being smothered by the darkness itself, its light choked by swirls of shadow. Her heartbeat quickened as she felt a presence other than her own. It was one she was very familiar with. She hadn't felt it in over a year, but there was no mistaking who it belonged to, nor the fact that it now felt more powerful than ever. She burst into a cold sweat as she realized that her worst fear had come to fruition.

She leapt hurriedly from her bed, throwing on a simple silk robe. She did not have time to dress fully. Whether Adam had fulfilled his mission or not, she didn't know, but certainly one of Hordak's prisoners had been freed, and he was coming for her. Evelyn clutched her orbed staff tightly as she rushed to the entrance of the temple, quickly erecting a magical barrier across its massive doorway. Sand from the surrounding desert flew in and hardened to glass, blocking the entryway. Even as the barrier erected itself, she knew it wouldn't be

enough. The entirety of Tellus was strong in magic and now that Grayskull was gone, Zalesia was the nexus of it all. As powerful as she was here, the man who came for her was all the more so. Here in Zalesia, he would wield far more power that she would be able to defend against.

A loud cracking sound reverberated throughout the temple as the magical barrier splintered; thousands of tiny fissures spreading across it like the web of a spider. She thrust her staff in front of her, barely able to produce a protective force field as the barrier shattered inward. Despite her protective field, there was simply too much debris for it to stop and much of it came crashing down around her. When a large chunk struck her forcefully in the side of the head, she felt the world fading to black and gave in to the darkness.



After what felt like hours, but in reality was only minutes later, she opened her eyes once more to find that she was partially buried beneath the mystical glass blocks that she had created. She found herself on her back, her legs pinned down by the debris. She was pleased to find that she appeared to be unharmed, despite her inability to pull herself from the rubble. However, that positive feeling was fleeting as she laid eyes on her attacker.

Before her was a familiar silhouette, backlit by the cloudless night sky. The black hooded cloak the man had wrapped himself in blew gently in the desert breeze. He spread his arms wide and she immediately found herself being pulled from the remnants of her barrier. She felt her feet leave the ground as she was elevated into the air and drawn toward him, out into the crisp night air of the Zalesian desert. She struggled to free herself from the grip of his magic, but her efforts were in vain. As she was brought closer to him, she could make out his features for the first time since his arrival. The familiar yellow-green skull stared blankly in her direction, but the empty eye sockets blazed red with a magical fire deep in their recesses. She began to speak, to plead for her life, but Skeletor stopped her by simply pressing his index finger to his mouth, silently shushing her. She quickly obeyed. "My dear Evil-Lyn," he said, his voice barely a whisper, "you have much to answer for."

She felt a tear streak down her cheek as she contemplated what was to come.

26.

THE COUNCIL OF KINGS

(One Year Later)

Duncan and Randor laughed as they watched their young grandson Dare play with Cringer in the royal bedchambers. The elderly Eternian tiger was gentle with the young prince, and allowed him more leeway than either grandfather would have expected. Dare would often pull the green tiger's fur, balling it up in his tiny fists, but Cringer merely purred with satisfaction as the prince would walk a few steps in pace to the cat, holding on tight, before crashing down to his bottom. The latest crash elicited a laugh not just from them, but from Dare's parents and aunt, who entered the room just as he plopped to the floor.

"Awww, are the two old grumps laughing at you?" Adora asked the child as she scooped him up into her arms. The past year had been difficult for her. She felt no more like an Eternian princess today than she had when she'd first arrived, but she had had nothing but support from Randor and the rest of her new family. They gave her space when she needed it, often going on solo treks through the part of Tellus known as Newland, and they gave her comfort when she needed it, as well. Her childhood had been stolen from her by Hordak, but she was still young, barely eighteen years of age due to how time had passed

differently on Etheria, and she knew that she still had much to offer the universe.

“We can’t help it,” Duncan said, replying to her comment. “He’s just as clumsy as Adam was at his age.”

“He’ll get his footing soon enough,” the king said with a laugh.

Duncan’s tone turned serious as he spoke again, “Adam, I understand wanting to celebrate Dare’s birthday in the biggest way possible. I think it’s wonderful,” he paused, choosing his words carefully, “but are you sure you want to go through with this other plan of yours?”

Adam nodded. “I think it’s the next logical step in uniting Tellus. The world itself is healed, but there is still much conflict between her kingdoms, and more than that, we now know that we have Hordak’s attention. Tellus has to be strong in case he finds some way here. If we stubbornly stay divided, and he strikes, we won’t last. I feel it’s the best solution; the only solution.”

“But surely you don’t need to include him.” Duncan emphasized his last word.

Adam shrugged. “If I didn’t include him, it would go against everything this plan stands for. Besides, I’m not in charge. We all stand on equal footing and the others all agree. The vote was unanimous. For better or worse, it is how it is.”

“Very well,” Duncan said, “but I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the idea.”

“Give it time, Father,” Teela said. “I trust Adam and the other kings’ judgment.”

“As do I,” Randor replied.

“You do?” Duncan asked his old friend, genuinely shocked.

“I refuse to spend the rest of my days living in fear,” Randor answered. “I didn’t think it was a good idea when Adam first presented it to me, but he’s since convinced me that it is for the best.” The former king nodded solemnly. “Tellus needs this.”

“Speaking of which,” Adora said as Dare giggled in her arms, “the people are waiting.”

Adam glanced at his chrono and nodded. “Indeed they are.” He removed his crown from where it lay on his dresser and placed it upon his head. “I just

hope that they are ready. Today everything changes.”



King Adam of Eternia entered the city square to the joyous cheers of his people with his queen Teela, who now held her son tightly in her arms. His father and Duncan followed, along with Adora. A large stage had been erected on the far end of the square and they each made their way up its steps in turn before taking their places in front of the Eternian people whom they served. The crowd’s cheers grew even louder before the king raised his hands, asking for silence. A projection of them was now being broadcast to all the kingdoms of Tellus, and he was proud to say his next words. “People of Eternia!” he shouted. “The war is over!” Loud cheers erupted once more. Skeletor had not been seen since his arrival back on Tellus with Adam, Adora and Randor, and now, a year since that date, the people finally felt safe. “What better way to celebrate the first birthday of my son, the young Prince Dare!”

As he spoke, Teela raised the prince high in the air for the people to see, his short blond hair sticking up awkwardly. Dare giggled as he was hoisted, seemingly unfazed by the noise of the crowd.

“But more than just a celebration for my family, it is one for all of our families,” Adam continued, “for Tellus and all of its kingdoms. Today is the dawning of a new era. Tellus has been healed, the once aptly-named Dark Hemisphere now two years into its rebirth as a vital and thriving land. Many of our loved ones have made their way to this Newland, and despite hardships in the beginning, have begun to find their place there. I wish them well, and want them to know that they are always welcome as our brothers and sisters.” The crowd cheered, aware that their king had been against the people moving in the early days, but the land had begun to stabilize and was now far safer than it had been shortly after it’s rejuvenation.

“There is more, my friends,” he said loudly in an attempt to speak over the cheers, which died down as he spoke. “My sister Adora, long thought lost to us has returned, as you know. In my effort to rescue my father, I had to travel to her world of Etheria and I learned many things in my time there. One is just how lucky we are, to be free people, to be comprised of many kingdoms of differing beliefs and practices, to not have to bow down to one despotic leader. We are

truly blessed to be people of Tellus. More than that, while there, I heard tales of Etheria's history before Hordak's invasion. I was told of a Council of Kings; monarchs who ruled together in peace and brotherhood. I have thought about this council much over the past year. Knowing now that there are beings out there like Hordak, who threaten entire worlds, I have decided that we need to adopt the council's ways here on Tellus. The other kings, queens, and leaders of the world have agreed to join me in this endeavor, ensuring that peace will once again reign on Tellus, after too many years of brutal war, and ensuring that, if attacked, we will stand together as one world." He waved his right hand across the crowd, brimming not just with humans, but winged Avionians, bat-like Speleans, bee-like Andreenids, and even the amphibious Aquarians. "You may not have realized it, but many of these leaders are here with us today to celebrate the Council's formation. Allow me to introduce them."

The crowd hushed as the people looked around, trying to find the monarchs that hid among them. The first to step forward was one very familiar to the people of Eternia, as he had long been their ally. "People of Tellus, please bid a fond welcome to Stratos, leader of Avion and longtime friend of the Eternian people." The crowd cheered as Stratos made his way onto the stage where he joined their king.

Next, a tall, cat-like humanoid with a flowing red cape emerged from the crowd. As he took the stage, Adam spoke one more. "Chief Carnivus, leader of the Quadians!" They cheered once more at the other Eternian ally who joined Adam and Stratos.

The introductions continued for several minutes as Buzz-Off of the Andreenids, Ceratus of the Caligars, and even Squidish Rex of the Aquarians, formerly known as Mer-Man, took the stage, along with other leaders from across the planet the people were less familiar with including Shun 'Ta, the latest chieftess of the Dytherian tribe.

"There is one final monarch to introduce to you," Adam said, surrounded by the royalty of Tellus. "Though we have often been at odds, we have extended the invitation to join the Council to him as an act of peace, for if this new Council of Kings was to willfully exclude anyone who would choose to participate, it would truly only be for show, and make hypocrites of us all." Adam paused and surveyed the crowd meaningfully. "And in the interest of peace, he has accepted." The crowd fell silent, glancing all around in an effort to lay eyes on this mysterious monarch their king spoke of. "We did not want to alarm you," Adam continued, "so we asked him to remain outside of the gates until he was called upon."

The crowd turned en masse to the massive gate that closed the capital off from the outside world, protecting it from its enemies. The gate opened slowly, revealing not one, but two figures, entering together. Murmurs erupted within the crowd as the man stepped forward into the capital city. He wore a horned helmet, the two horns meeting above his head, a translucent orb at their center. The yellow-green skull within it was recognizable to all. A thick animal pelt rested on his shoulders, connected to a cape that flowed behind him as he entered. On his right was the woman every Eternian knew as Evil-Lyn, her black armor bright and polished, a purple cape flowing behind her. Gasps could be heard as the people parted to allow them through, their fear and confusion palpable.

Some of the braver members of the crowd shouted at the man and woman as they passed by, threatening them, before Adam spoke once more. "Be calm, my friends! They are our guests." Adam realized that his people must think he'd gone insane. He was, however, one of very few who knew the changes Skeletor had undergone during his long absence. After returning to Tellus, Adam had reached out to Evelyn and repaired the alliance that he had had with her before he left for Etheria; before she had become disgusted with his choosing to lie to the late Kira 'Na. Adam had learned from that mistake and had, over time, convinced Evelyn of it. What he learned afterward stunned him more than he ever could have imagined, although his sister Adora claimed to not be surprised.

When their old enemy reached the stage, Adam could feel the other kings tense up as the man made his way up the steps to join them, along with Evelyn. The old sorcerer lifted his long cloak back and over his shoulders, revealing purple and gold mechanical armor. Against his blue skin, it shone brightly in the noon-day sun and he looked regal, truly belonging on the stage with the other kings. "People of Tellus, I give you the final member of your Council of Kings." Adam paused, honestly relishing the moment and the crowd's anticipation. "Please welcome Keldor, king of the reborn Zalesia and ruler of the Gar!"

As Adam spoke the words, the final Council member lifted off his helmet, revealing that the skull was in fact a part of it, the removal of the facade exposing his true face, one that no Eternian had seen for decades. His long black hair and goatee had grayed slightly with age, primarily at his temples, but thanks to a combination of magic and his mixed Eternian and Gar heritage, his body had retained its youthful look longer than a normal Eternian. Adam knew that the Eternian people had no knowledge that his uncle Keldor was once Skeletor. They had surely thought the skull-faced monster had been standing before them, and were shocked to see the long banished Eternian Lord instead. Adam and his family had kept Skeletor's identity a secret, and now that his uncle had agreed to join him on the Council, with much prodding from Adora, Adam was

glad for it. Although tensions between Eternia and the Gar remained, not to mention tensions between his family and Keldor, the Eternian people would be far more accepting of Keldor if they didn't connect him with his previous identity of Skeletor. Some would be wise enough to see it, he knew, but he hoped that they would trust the Council's choice regardless.

How and why Skeletor had decided to forgo the portion of his power granted to him by The Nameless One, Adam didn't know, but he felt sure that Evelyn had had something to do with it, having discovered the loophole to her own curse sometime prior. Also helpful, he assumed, was the fact that Keldor was finally a king. Perhaps not of the land his father's bloodline had promised him, but a king, nonetheless. He had used his magic to raise Zalesia from the sands of time, rebuilding it better than before, finally giving the Gar race a permanent home, easing tensions with their former neighbors, the Dytherians, in the process. With Grayskull gone, perhaps Zalesia and an entire race of people was enough for his uncle. Time would tell. In the meantime, it was best for the people of Tellus that they worked together, so Adam would put aside his fears, bury his worries, and do what was best for the people. He would, however, keep a close eye on his uncle and the powerful warrior race he now ruled.

There was a long silence from the crowd before an older man toward the front shouted, "Welcome back, King Keldor of the House of Miro, brother of Randor!" To Adam's relief, the crowd went along, trusting the Council's judgment and erupting in cheers at the return of Keldor, who stood before them a changed man. He looked to his uncle and saw that Keldor couldn't help but crack a wry smile.

27.

A GOOD JOURNEY

After the celebration over the formation of the Council had ended, the royal family had returned to Eternos Palace, where they mingled with the other Council members and shared stories with Adam and Teela of their own children. Adam saw Teela clutch Dare tight instinctively as the large wooden door of the Council Chamber opened and Keldor and Evelyn stepped through. The Gar king held his helmet under his right arm, and Adam couldn't help but feel as if the familiar skull was staring at him. It unsettled him that Keldor continued to use it as a symbol, but this entire alliance was built on compromise and trust. Adam, Teela, Randor, Duncan and Adora all stood close as their two former enemies slowly approached them. They all stood in awkward silence before Randor finally spoke. "Now there's a face I haven't seen in quite some time."

Keldor gave his brother an annoyed smirk. "Funny." Turning his attention back to Adam and Teela, he spoke again, his voice charming, but with a touch of menace that Adam couldn't ignore. "I wish to thank you for your offer to join the Council and want you to know that your family has nothing to fear from me. Eternia means little to me anymore. Besides, I have enough of my own problems to attend to in Zalesia. The Gar are a restless people. Their adjustment to having both a permanent home and a new leader has not been without difficulty.

As such, we will not be staying long. I merely came here for the ceremony and to greet the new prince.”

“Thank you,” Adam said. “Truly, this is a new day for all of Tellus. Although we may never be friends, I am glad to have you as an ally.”

Keldor scoffed. “‘Ally’ is a strong word. For now be glad only that we are not enemies. That can always change depending on how this all plays out. I will not be silent on this Council, Adam. I expect to be treated as an equal.”

“That is the very cornerstone of the Council’s purpose, Keldor,” he answered. “Without it, the whole thing is a farce.”

“See that that remains true,” the sorcerer replied shortly. “I come for another reason, as well. Just as I have come to greet Eternia’s prince, I also came to say goodbye to its princess.” He turned to Adora, whose face quickly drained of color.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“I read it in your eyes the moment I saw you,” Keldor answered.

“What is he talking about, Adora?” Randor asked.

She sighed slightly. “I’ve been thinking about it for some time. I love you all, I really do. You’ve given me something I never truly had until now: a family, and I’ll always be thankful for that, but...” she trailed off.

“You wish to return to Etheria,” Randor finished for her.

“Yes.”

“I suppose it was only a matter of time,” her father said, a sadness in his voice that he couldn’t hide.

“It’s not that I don’t love it here, but all of Tellus is now at peace, for the first time in countless years. Meanwhile, Etheria is still at war, still controlled by Hordak. Although I was born here, Etheria is my home. I can’t just stand by and let that madman continue to ravage it. I can help the Rebellion. I know things about The Horde that they couldn’t possibly know, things that would be beneficial to them in their effort to drive Hordak out forever.”

“Of course, my daughter, I understand,” he said. “Your conviction to help the people of that world is simply further proof that you have left Despara behind, and have truly become a great and wondrous person with a beautiful soul.”

Randor spread his arms wide and Adora rushed into their embrace. "I assume you will use the Cosmic Key?"

"Yes," she answered. "Keldor can teach me the correct sequences."

"Think about what you are doing," Keldor advised. "You are returning not only the Key to Etheria, but also the Grayskull bloodline. You must be cautious."

"What better place to hide from Hordak than right under his nose?" she asked.

"Don't underestimate him," Keldor warned. "Call on me if you need me."

"I will," she said. As she broke away from her father, she looked to Adam and Teela. "I cannot thank you enough for your hospitality. I know you weren't sure if you could trust me at first but I love you all the more for letting me live here just the same."

"Of course," Teela replied. "You're family!" She embraced her sister-in-law, along with young Dare, who played with Adora's blond hair, now long and flowing. "You'll always be welcome here, Adora."

When Teela let her go, Duncan reached out his hand, which Adora took in her own and shook vigorously. "You're quite the warrior, kid. The Etherian rebels will be lucky to have you."

Adam simply smiled and pulled her into his arms. "We'll talk more about this later. I have something I want to give you before you go."

"Of course. I'll leave in the morning," Adora replied. She walked away from the group as Evelyn and Teela shared a laugh over Dare. Approaching a window, the former Force Captain of The Horde, now Eternian princess, and soon to be Etherian Rebel, looked out over Eternia for what would surely be one of the last times.

"Change can be difficult," she heard Keldor say from behind her. He stepped closer and stood next to her in the sunlight. "But good can come from it. Beware Hordak's power. Do not strike at him head-on, but from the shadows. Guerrilla tactics will suit your rebellion better than open attacks. You need to be a scalpel rather than a sword."

"Thank you, Uncle." She turned and grinned at him. "I'm sorry I tortured you so much back on Etheria. You're not so bad, really."

He laughed. "Don't fool yourself into thinking that that is true. I let you

believe that you had control over me, but now you know better.”

“No one has control over you but yourself, do they?” she asked.

“Never,” he answered.

“And this Council of Kings Adam has formed?” she continued.

“What about it?”

She shot him a stern look. “Are you going to play along?”

“Unless they give me reason not to.”

“I know you don’t play well with others,” she said.

He looked at her and nodded. “True, but for the first time in my life, I am contented.”

“So you no longer wish to be master of the universe?” she asked.

He chuckled softly. “If I have learned anything, it is that while you may be able to discover some of its secrets, the universe itself cannot be mastered. So I fight for smaller things, such as mastery over my own life, which is something that I have to admit has eluded me thus far. Your brother told me when we first returned that I no longer had anything to fight for, but that isn’t true.” He thought back to Kira ‘Na’s final words to him. “I fight for my legacy, one that will live on long after I have gone.”

“Myself, as well,” Adora replied. “Adam and his friends will find it hard to believe you, though I don’t care what they think. You did save the universe, after all,” she laughed wryly.

He nodded, an almost imperceptible smile on his face. “Indeed, if only to save myself. Do not be mistaken, Adora. I have never sought redemption. I still do not. I have no regrets. I am no different now than I was before, but this curse being lifted has given me an opportunity.”

“What kind of opportunity?”

“To enjoy the power I wield without the burden of the madness the Dark Hemisphere and my disfigurement caused me.”

“Then why do you still use the skull?” she asked. “Why not leave it in the past with Skeletor?”

“It is a powerful symbol,” Keldor replied, holding the helmet aloft in front of them. He paused a long moment before lowering it. “And it is a reminder that shortcuts to power are an illusion. My true power resides within me, as it always has.”

“Indeed,” she agreed.

“I may have stalled Hordak from completing his life’s mission, Adora, but now your return to Etheria threatens us all. This worries me,” he admitted. “Be mindful of the danger your actions will create.”

“I will,” Adora answered. “I promise. My plan is not just to stop him from achieving his goal, but to remove his threat altogether. Etheria deserves a chance at freedom.”

Keldor reached to the back of his belt and removed a small electronic device, which he handed to her. “I predicted your departure long ago. I just didn’t know when it would occur. To this end, I have included three sequences for the Cosmic Key on this device. One is for Etheria, near the Whispering Woods. The other two are for Tellus; one for Eternia, and the second for Zalesia.”

“In case I want to visit?” she asked with a smile.

“In case you need my help,” he answered.

“Maybe I’ll do both.” She took it with an appreciative nod. “Thank you, Uncle. I am in your debt.”

“Consider us even,” he said.

“So, about Evelyn,” she paused for a moment, “I must say I’m surprised to see her here after what I’ve learned of her. I assume that she was the one you spoke of. The one who betrayed you?”

“I had thought that, yes,” he answered.

“Something changed your mind?”

“Evelyn has a way about her,” Keldor said with a slight smile. “She’s very good at getting herself out of trouble. More than that, I now realize that she has given me a great gift: a second chance.”

“Not many of us get those,” she said quietly.

“No,” he replied. “It would appear that you and I are in a rather exclusive

club in that regard.” He reached up with his left hand and squeezed her right arm affectionately. “Good luck with yours.” With that, he turned and made his way back to Evelyn. The two of them left early, eager to return to Zalesia and leave Eternia in their past.



Later that evening, Adora stood on the balcony of her bedroom in the palace. The sun was bright on her face as it began to set behind the mountains in the distance. She took a moment to smell the scent of scarletian flowers in the air, coming from the fields beyond the city walls, far below the tower she stood in. Billowy white clouds drifted by in the gentle breeze. Adora felt it on her face, blowing her hair about, tickling her ears. She could hear Dare’s young cries coming from down the hall. After allowing herself several more minutes to savor the sight of the kingdom, Adora sighed and turned, surprised to see her brother Adam standing in her room. With him were Randor, Duncan and Teela, who held the now quiet Dare close to her. Adam was leaning against the frame of the balcony door and smiled at her when she saw him. “I’m sorry we surprised you, but you looked so at peace.”

This was the moment she had dreamt of again and again; the horrible nightmare in which she killed her brother night after night. This time it would end differently. This time she was in control. “I am,” she said with a smile, “for the first time that I can remember.”

Adam stepped away from the door and removed his sword from a sheath on his back. He held it out in both hands, offering it to her. “I wanted to give you this.”

As Adam spoke, Adora saw Randor look upon her with sadness. It was the second time she was being taken from him, but Adora hoped that her father would at least find comfort in the fact that it was now her choice. More than that, she now had the ability to return if she ever felt the need to be near her family. Without removing her gaze from her father, she took the sword gingerly. “Your sword?”

“Yes,” Adam replied. “It’s not just any sword, Adora. It is the unified Sword of Power, which brought balance to Tellus.”

She lowered her gaze to the weapon only to see her own face staring back at her, reflected within its mirror-like surface. It was no longer the face of a stranger. After years of hiding it from the world, it was finally her own. "I... I don't know what to say," Adora stammered.

Adam smiled. "You don't have to say anything. I hope that it brings as much luck to you as it did to me. It's quite the weapon. The Sword of Light was given to me when I was around your age, actually, and was what allowed me to become He-Man. Keldor's Sword of Darkness has since merged with it and made it what it is, along with the Stone of Protection embedded within it, a gift from Evelyn. The Stone of Protection saved me several times during my journey to Etheria. Within the sword also is the power of the Sorceress. I could not tap into her power as I once had Grayskull's. I didn't understand why at first. However, I now feel that her power was never meant for me. It was meant for you. It's likely that the Sorceress knew that this would happen all along. The sword is, in a way, a gift from all of us; a piece of each of us for you to take with you. Now the Sword of Protection, I hope that it will be of great help to you in your battle against Hordak."

"Thank you," Adora replied, still at a loss for words. She looked up from the reflection of her face in the sword to see them all smiling at her proudly. The sight of their own faces had become so comforting to her over the last year, along with the love she felt for them. They were her family. Her real family. It hurt her to leave them but she knew, no matter how far away she was, that they would always be there for her. "Thank you all for everything."

"Just promise me one thing," Adam requested.

"Anything, Brother."

"When you use this sword, forged by King Grayskull himself, promise me you will do so with honor."

"I will, Adam. Always." As she held the sword tight, she felt a tear run down her cheek as she prepared to take the next great step on her life's journey. She was saddened to leave her family, but Etheria needed her. She had no choice but to return and bring the fight to The Horde. With a smile, she held the sword aloft and swore an oath she promised herself that she would repeat each time she used it in defense of Etheria. "For the honor of Grayskull!"

End

AFTERWORD

I'll let you in on a little secret: this isn't the book that I intended to write. In fact, I never intended to write another MOTU book at all. In late 2012, when my wife Wendy and I first discussed turning the Keldor short stories I had written into a novel, I had no intentions of doing more than one. Even when I had finished writing and had typed those two familiar words that would tell the readers that they had in fact reached "the end," I still didn't plan on doing another one. That was before I spoke to a friend of mine who had read an early draft. The original draft of "The Keldor Chronicles" had ended with Randor and Skeletor trapped in Despondos, the Sorceress of Grayskull dead, and the castle itself destroyed. Adam, Teela and Duncan rode off into the sunset and that was it. While Skyping with my friend however, he convinced me to write an epilogue, something which I was, at least originally, against. I didn't want to "tease" potential readers with a story that I had no intention of writing. Well, he must have been pretty convincing because I did it anyway and it ended up being one of the best parts of the book in my opinion, with a large part of that having to do with what would become the last line of the story, spoken by Randor to his long-lost daughter: "You have your mother's eyes." My wife, who truly is the World's Greatest Editor (caps required), came up with that line, and she'll never let me forget it. Then again, how could I? It's a fantastic line and would be the impetus for the existence of what you now know as "MOTU: Legacies."

Not long before I wrote that short epilogue, probably less than two months, the character we all knew and loved as Princess Adora/She-Ra had made her new DC Comics debut as "Despara" in a digital comic. I'm not going to go on and on about the DC books, some fans love them and some fans hate them, but I can most definitely say that I was intrigued by this new version of Adora and I decided to use her as the focal point of the "Chronicles" epilogue. Now generally, it isn't normal to introduce a new character in the last four pages or so of a book, much less two, counting Catra, and a new location, to boot. However, that is what I did and when all was said and done and that last line had been spoken by Randor (a character I started out unfamiliar with who ended up being one of the strongest and most heroic of "The Keldor Chronicles" cast), the story screamed for a follow-up. Kudos to Wendy for that line because after that... heck, even I wanted to know what happened next.

It didn't take long to map out the plot of the sequel. Randor and Skeletor were imprisoned and Adam would travel to Etheria to free them. Along the way,

Despara would learn the truths of her origins and return home as Adora. This would be the early part of the book. The rest would follow Skeletor after his return to his home planet of Tellus, telling the story of his journey toward becoming the king of Zalesia and ruler of the Gar. The book would be titled “King Skeletor” and it would be flipp’n awesome! Except that that’s not exactly the book you’ve just finished reading, is it?

If you write fiction at all, you probably know the feeling: you can try and try to make a story go in one direction, but if it doesn’t want to go there, you can’t force it, at least not without doing it a disservice. I’ve learned from “Legacies” that early outlines are meant to be thrown out, at least in large part. The bigger plot points can usually stay, but more often than not, the story evolves and changes in ways you least expect it to. You would think that writing is fun because you get to be a creator; a god-like being who controls everything. In reality, much of the fun of being a writer, for me at least, is not being in control of what you are doing at all, but in fact just watching it happen organically. Sure, you have control of the reigns, and you can steer where it goes, but a story is always better, at least in my opinion, when it tells itself. That’s what happened with this book. As badly as I wanted to make Skeletor/Keldor the focus again, Despara cried out to me and stole the book from him.

Why is that, I wonder? In a lot of ways, the concept of the Despara character just resonated with me. In my mind, she was the embodiment of someone who hides who they are in an effort to be accepted; someone who hides their emotions, even from themselves. Especially from themselves. I have long struggled with depression, and the character of Despara spoke to me, both as an outcast and as a ray of hope. She was someone who proved that people could learn to make better decisions, better choices in life. She proved that people can change. That is a powerful story that many people can appreciate, not just me, and it didn’t take long at all to realize that she was the focus of the new book, whether I had intended her to be or not. She demanded it.

If you’ve read the DC comics, you know that my version of Despara is quite different from theirs. This is primarily due to the fact that I was writing “Legacies” at the same time that Despara was making most of her appearances in the comics. I actually largely ignored the comics while I was writing the bulk of the story; at least until I felt like I had a handle on my version of the character. I didn’t want DC’s Despara to influence mine, even though theirs was the official, canonical version. In my heart, Despara was mine, and I largely treated her as an original creation. I knew that mine was different and was not the official version, but in the end none of my versions of the MOTU characters are, so I figured, “why should she be any different?”

If someone were to ask me, I'd have to say that I prefer the "Legacies" version over the official one. Why? Because if I didn't, then I would be a terrible writer. Of course I prefer this one! She's mine! Haha. But to be more specific, I will tell you one of the reasons why. The primary reason is her mask/helmet. In the comics, it seems to serve no purpose, other than (we are left to assume) protection. Despara was (again, in my mind) a character who struggled with identity. Having a mask for no real reason was a wasted opportunity. Nothing about a character's look should be just for aesthetics; it has to serve a purpose, and I wanted to give her mask a purpose. I wanted to make it a vital part of her character, and more than that, of the story itself. I hope that I succeeded in that regard. The moment where she finally forsakes it and announces to the world that her name is "Adora" is one of my favorite moments in the story. Needless to say, I found myself loving writing her and she is now one of my favorite Masters of the Universe characters, canon or not. Of course, by the end of the book, the "Despara" identity is gone and she is on her way to becoming the Adora we already knew and loved, but the duality of the Despara/Adora roles will always intrigue me and I'm grateful that I was able to spend so much time with her and explore it.

There are other stories to tell (namely whatever happened to that Skeletor book? I'm sad to say that it will probably never see the light of day), but this afterword is getting a bit long, so I think I'll bid you all a fond farewell. I hope that you enjoyed "MOTU: Legacies." It was a labor of love getting this book done, with about as much real-life drama involved as there is in the story itself, but in the end I'm glad to have written it. More than that, I'm glad to have been able to share my MOTU canon with so many awesome and inspiring fellow fans, through both "The Keldor Chronicles" and "Legacies." I think that my time here in the MOTU universe is done, however. I have original characters that I left behind who have been calling to me for some time now, eager for my return. Maybe one day, you'll get to meet them.

Thank you for all of your support and good journey,
-Matthew C. Kayser

PS: I'd love to hear from you. I can be easily reached at either book's Facebook page or on the He-Man.Org forums, where I use the screenname "KeldorTheCursed."

PPS: Thank you once again to [Mattias Fahlberg](#) for the awesome cover.

["Legacies" on Facebook](#)
["The Keldor Chronicles" on Facebook](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew C. Kayser is a longtime Masters of the Universe fan who fondly remembers staging epic battles in his back yard with a slew of different MOTU action figures. As a child, his favorite was Mer-Man. As an adult, it has become Keldor. Last year, he released his first novel "Masters of the Universe: The Keldor Chronicles" to acclaim from MOTU fans. "Masters of the Universe: Legacies" is its sequel.

Matt has a long history of working in retail and has lived in several interesting places including Miami FL. He currently lives in Virginia with his wife, Wendy and their cats, who form their own "Great Rebellion" whenever it's time to eat.

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