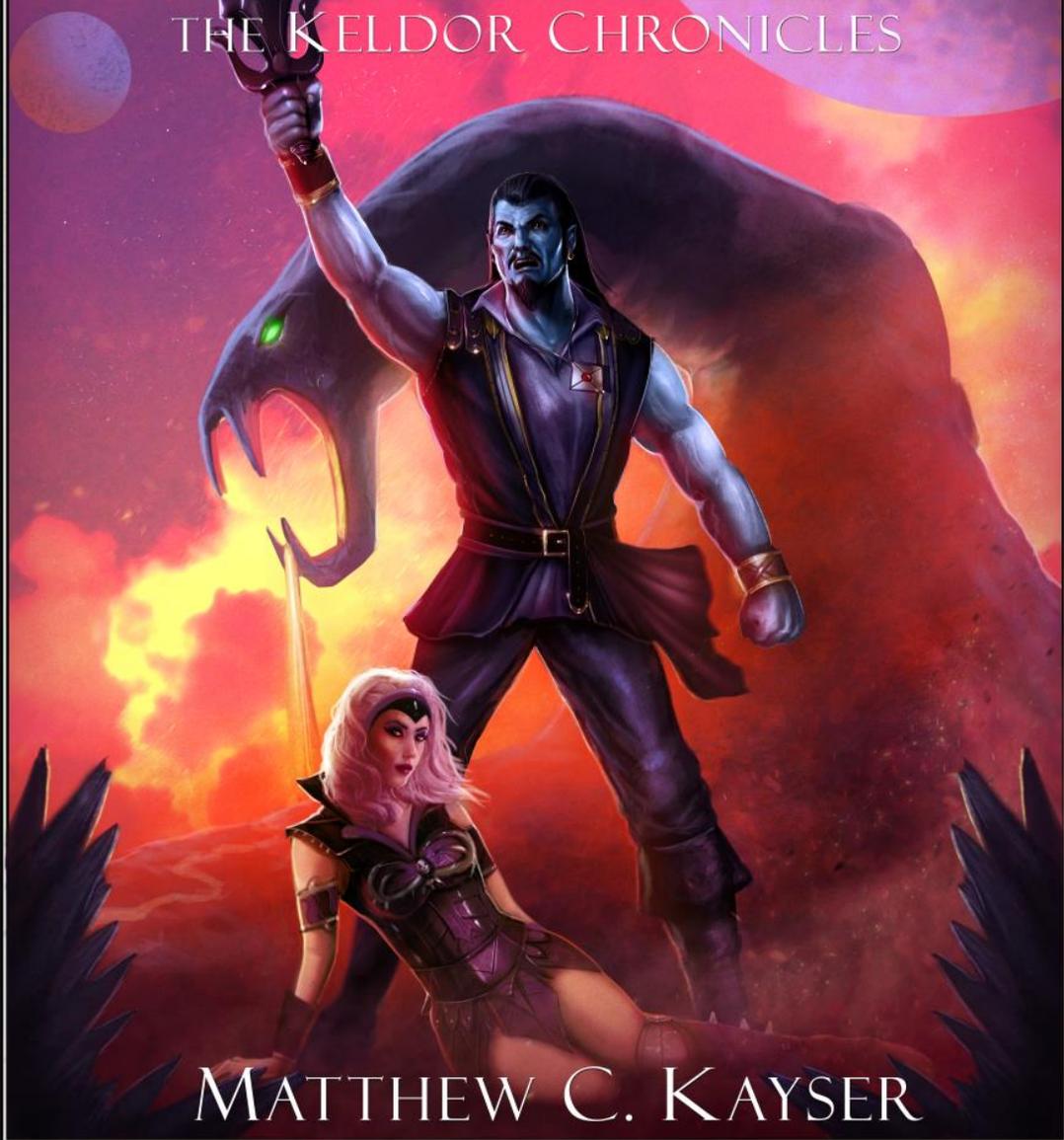


MASTERS

OF THE UNIVERSE

THE KELDOR CHRONICLES



MATTHEW C. KAYSER

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Introduction:

My take on the world of Masters of the Universe (MOTU) is very different from the established one. Although I love these characters, there are many different interpretations due to the variety of media in which they have appeared (cartoons, comics, a movie, etc.). I didn't want to limit myself to just one influence. I found it was best to take what I liked from each interpretation and merge it all into my own universe. I've kind of cherry-picked out what I thought worked (the sword and sorcery with a dash of science-fiction), and threw away what I thought didn't (sorry, Orko fans).

The great thing about this is that you don't have to know anything about MOTU to enjoy this story. Don't be intimidated if you aren't familiar with the characters. They will each be reintroduced as if it were their very first appearance. If you are familiar with them, know that my love of MOTU stems from the original mini-comics, the toys (of course), and Frank Langella's fantastic portrayal of Skeletor in the 1987 movie. Those are the things that influenced me the most for this story, although most of it comes from the twisted recesses of my own imagination. By the way, I'm not disregarding the cartoons in any way. You'll see some influences from them as well (both original and MYP), though this story is more of an adult take on the subject. Those familiar may also notice an Easter egg here and there.

This story was written purely for fun. Although many of the lesser characters in "The Keldor Chronicles" are of my own creation, I do not lay claim to any of the established characters within, as Mattel owns them all. Despite this, I have put my own spin on them (explored in the Appendix) and I hope you like the story.

If I had to rate this story, I guess it'd be PG-13. I didn't go for an over the top grittiness or aim this story at adults to be "cool." I simply wanted to make it as real as the characters and world would allow.

I hope you enjoy it!

-Matthew C. Kayser

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-THEN-

PART I

The kingdom of Eternia had been born in blood. For generations, its leaders had fought to distance their land from its war-torn past. Tonight, war had found them once again.

The people of Eternia understood war. It was fought by light of day, face-to-face. It was fought with honor and respect. Tonight, their enemies were breaking all of the rules Eternians fought by. For thousands of years, through countless battles, the capitol city had never fallen. Tonight, that would change.

The air was thick with smoke as explosions rocked the countryside. The cries of the Eternian people echoed throughout the nearby mountains as the villages surrounding the capitol were sacked and burned. A farmer, lean and muscled due to a lifetime spent tending fields, rushed one of the alien invaders from behind with a crude steel sword. His tarnished blade caught the moonlight as he swung it with all of the force that he could manage at the creature. It broke and shattered as it struck his enemy's highly advanced alloy armor. The farmer's eyes grew wide as the grotesque-looking invader turned in his direction, swiftly grabbing him by the throat with one armored hand. It lifted him two feet off of the ground until they were at eye level with each other. The farmer gazed deep into the alien's eyes, blood red and soulless. The alien grinned sadistically as the

Eternian thrashed uselessly in his iron grip, amused that such a fragile creature had attacked him. Darkness crept into the edges of the man's vision. As his extremities went numb, the Eternian farmer realized this vile creature would be the last thing he would ever see. Before long, all went black and he no longer felt any pain.

As the fires from the Eternians' homes lit up the darkness of night like a bloody sunrise, Hordak surveyed the destruction and smiled. He dropped the man who had attacked him to the ground at his feet. Hordak was enjoying himself tonight, as was his army. This wasn't a battle. It was a massacre. A monstrosity that would appear to have existed only in nightmares, Hordak was indeed very real. Having been born on a planet distant from Tellus, Hordak bore little resemblance to anything of the planet these people called home, save for his humanoid shape. Tall, powerful and clad in black armor, he scoffed as he kicked the Eternian man's body aside. Hordak's head was shell-like and resembled a bizarre mix of a vampire bat and a creature of the sea, his skin a two-toned gray pallor. A crest of scales rose from his brow, continuing to the rear of his head, another fearsome element of his alien appearance. As he smiled, his sharp teeth glistened in the firelight.

The sigil of the Horde army that stretched across Hordak and his troopers' chests was a red, bat-like face, modeled after his own visage. Flowing over his massive armored shoulders, the red cape that trailed behind him gave the appearance of wings, the bottom scalloped into points. All combined, it made a frightening being of great power seem even more intimidating. His army, consisting of countless beings from across the cosmos, was legendary in its cold, calculating conquests. Many worlds had fallen to the Horde, and his troops knew that this one would be no different.

The villagers ran for their lives as Hordak's heavily-armored fighters clamored for blood, creating chaos and devastation all around them. The Horde earned its name due to the great numbers that made up its army. When in full force, they became a phalanx of warriors that seemed to pulsate and breathe as a living being when viewed from a distance. They were spoken of only in whispers throughout the galaxies, for fear of their power. Hordak had brought with him only a single regiment for this attack, a thousand men and women of various races, united under Hordak's crest and duty-bound to serve his will.

The destruction of these farming villages was merely a statement, a show of strength. Not far ahead was the capitol of the Eternian kingdom. At its center lay Eternos Palace, home of King Randor: the Horde's true destination. Walking behind Hordak, ahead of his army, were two of his chief lieutenants. The first was a dark sorceress called Evil-Lyn. She wore black armor with purple accents. A half-skirt of the same color fell from her hips and wrapped behind her, stopping just above the backs of her heels. Resting upon her head was a sleek black helmet crested with a crown of spikes that crossed the helm horizontally, from ear to ear. A small skull acted as the centerpiece and rode high upon her forehead. Her bright

yellow skin nearly glowed with powerful magic.

The second lieutenant was a sorcerer even more fearsome than Evil-Lyn. Nearly as powerful as Hordak and almost equally feared amongst the legions of Horde warriors, the creature's name was Skeletor. He was tall and broad shouldered, his skin a sickly bluish-gray. Where a face should have been there was only an eerie yellow-green skull, shrouded in near darkness by a black hooded cape, which flowed behind him as he marched ahead of the troops now moving on to Eternos Palace, just over the horizon. He wore black leather armor, the chest adorned with a crest similar to the Horde's bat, but stylized into Skeletor's own unique version. The crest rode high above a red jewel which was crossed with silver metal, shaped to resemble human bones. Long strips of black leather hung from the front and rear of his belt, and his armored black boots came to the tops of his knees. His muscular forearms were enclosed within black metal bracers.

A purple sword was sheathed on Skeletor's back, its hilt as dark as his armor. One half of the legendary Power Sword, legend said that when combined with its counterpart, the Sword of Light, it would bring balance to Tellus and unlock the secrets of Castle Grayskull, perhaps even the universe itself. Skeletor's half was known as the Sword of Darkness, and its power was beyond human understanding. There was a reason such a legend surrounded it. Due to the powerful dark magic that Skeletor used to intimidate the people of the worlds they conquered, along with the Horde Troopers themselves, he had come to be known as the Lord of Destruction.

It was not long before the invading army approached a massive gate, the main entrance in the wall surrounding the Eternian capitol city. There were other, less obvious ways to enter the Eternian capitol, but the Horde didn't specialize in subtlety. Evil-Lyn and Skeletor raised their arms in unison and began chanting in an old tongue. The chant echoed and resonated, growing louder, deeper, the sound of it chilling the Eternian soldiers inside to the bone. The language they spoke was unnatural and evil, and carried with it a dark power. Hordak smiled as the gate exploded and shattered inward, wooden shards flying like shrapnel into King Randor's forces, killing and wounding many upon impact. The more heavily-armored members of the Eternian Royal Guard steeled themselves for battle as they saw their numbers already depleted, many of their friends dying before they'd even seen the enemy. The eerie chant died and Skeletor glanced at Evil-Lyn. If his gruesome skull could smile, it would. She sensed it and smiled back at him. This was a moment she had long waited for.

"Come." Hordak strode through the city walls slowly and with purpose, his two lieutenants following behind him along with the Horde army.

■ ■ ■

Alarms blared throughout Eternos Palace, the sound nearly deafening. Flashing lights lit up the palace in conjunction with the shrill sound of the alert system. "They're getting closer, Randor!" Duncan shouted to his friend over the siren as he looked up from the readout on his gauntlet. A large man, made larger by a mechanical armor of his own design, Duncan was the Eternian Man-At-Arms and captain of the Royal Guard. A childhood friend of Randor's, he was the king's closest ally. The primary general of the Eternian forces, and creator of many of their advanced weapons, Duncan was as intelligent as he was imposing. At this moment his voice was filled with fear, an emotion seldom seen in the man whom many considered to be the bravest in all of Eternia.

King Randor's eyes widened with shock. An attack on the Eternian capitol, usually safe at the center of the kingdom, was rare. "What's the status of our army?"

"A large portion is in Avion assisting our allies. They are too far away to be of any help, but I've already called in every soldier stationed along the borders of the kingdom."

Randor winced at the sound of the alarm as he took in what his friend had said. "Turn off that blasted noise!" the king yelled in an attempt to be heard. Duncan pressed a button on his readout and the sound stopped, but the flashing lights remained. "How long until those reinforcements arrive?"

Duncan glanced quickly at his chrono. "They should be here within the hour."

"How long until the invading army breaches the city walls?"

Duncan raised his head and met the king's gaze evenly. "They already have."

Randor felt a sick feeling grow in the pit of his stomach, but nodded curtly. "Have someone fetch my armor."

"Already on its way."

"Good. How could they have gotten here so quickly and where could they have come from? The Dark Hemisphere? Who has such an army?" Tellus had long ago been split down the center by dark magic into a light half and a dark half. The Dark Hemisphere held many dangers, both natural and unnatural. It would not have been the first time Eternia had come under attack from its inhabitants, though it was usually the outlying villages that were vulnerable, not the capitol city.

Duncan shook his head in response. “No, Sire. Not from the Dark Hemisphere, at least not that we can tell.” Duncan only called Randor “Sire” in the most serious of times. This certainly qualified. “I’ve been receiving steady reports since we first heard of the invaders’ arrival and they all show them to have just appeared. At least a thousand warriors emerged from some type of portal outside the capitol. They’ve razed two of the nearby villages, and now that they have broken through the city walls, they are making a beeline here, to Eternos Palace.”

Randor stiffened. The numbers. The mysteriously sudden appearance. Both of these things meant that this invading force could be only one army. It was known as the Horde. Randor had always considered the Horde to be more of a ghost story than a real threat. Ruled by an alien being of immense power called Hordak, the Horde were world conquerors. Supposedly they had existed for thousands of years, though there was no proof of such a thing. Randor knew, however, that he had heard of them as early as his own childhood, when his father King Miro would tell him tales of Eternia’s history.

Enhanced with mechanical armors similar to Duncan’s, Eternia’s army was formidable and it had been many years since anyone had made an attempt on Eternos Palace due to their strength. Only Hordak would be so bold.

“I fear it may be the Horde, Sire,” Duncan said quickly, echoing Randor’s thoughts.

“I was just thinking the same thing.” A guard appeared with his royal armor and Randor began to assemble it and prepare for battle. As he dressed hastily, he stole a glance at his friend. “Who first gave word of this army?”

Duncan stroked his large brown mustache, an old nervous habit, before he caught himself and stopped, resting his hands at his side. He did not want his friend to see how upset he was, not when the Eternian king needed him to be strong. “My young daughter, Teela. We watch the stars every night and whenever she can’t sleep that’s what she does. She was awakened in the night and when she looked through my scope, she saw the fire from the villages. She alerted her nursemaid Lisana who then contacted me directly.”

“Is Teela safe?”

Duncan nodded quickly, thankful for his daughter’s safety and appreciative of his friend’s concern. “Yes. She’s been moved to a safe place and Lisana hasn’t left her side.”

“That is good news.” Randor finished fastening his armor into place as his wife rushed into the tower with his twin children and a bevy of nursemaids and guards. This tower was heavily fortified and was one of the safest places in the palace. It was standard procedure for the royal family to head there whenever the alarms went off.

“Randor!” Marlena carefully handed the two infants to a nearby lady-in-waiting and rushed to her husband, wrapping her arms around him in a tight embrace. “The alarms woke us and I was filled in on what was happening. It’s so awful!”

“Yes. You know that I must fight,” he said to her softly.

“I know, my love. Be careful.” She paused and he could hear her voice tremble as she came to terms with the fact that her husband would soon be in grave danger. Eternia was more than just the royal family. It belonged to the people and it was his duty to defend them. “Come back to us.”

“I promise you that I will,” the king answered. The twins began to cry and Randor could only think of how it made them seem even smaller and more helpless in this terrifying moment.

“You should go, Randor.” Queen Marlena broke away from him and eyed her husband lovingly, but as always when he went into battle, her eyes held a strong sense of fear within them as well.

King Randor gazed at his children, held with great care in the woman named Diana’s arms. He stared into their bright eyes, now wet with tears, and prayed that he would see them again soon. “Yes. You’re right, my love.” He turned from the twins and kissed his wife passionately, but quickly. “Keep them safe. Our most trusted guards will be posted at the base of the tower and at this door.” Randor turned and walked with Duncan into the hall, taking one look back before locking the door behind them. The king’s eyes met those of the two guards left at the door and he remembered their names as Kyron and Thrahn. “My family’s safety depends on you. Serve them well.”

Thrahn looked his king in the eye. “We will not fail, Sire.”

“I know you won’t.” Randor turned, his red and gold armor reflecting the moonlight coming through the windows as he and his friend quickly descended the spiral stairs of the tower. “What type of creatures do we face, Duncan?”

Duncan brought up the latest reports on his gauntlet and read the highlights with haste as they made their way. “Such as we’ve never seen, my King. At least a thousand enemy soldiers, heavily armored. The technological aspects of their armor make ours look tame in comparison. I’ve just received word from the battle that the leader is a sorcerer named Hordak. That confirms that it is indeed the Horde, Sire, if there were any doubt. He has two others with him that we assume to be high ranking lieutenants. The first is a man with no face, only a skull. Reportedly a powerful sorcerer. Name unknown. The other is a female magic wielder who has identified herself as Evil-Lyn, but we know her better as ‘Evelyn.’”

The name was one Randor had not heard in years. “The Sorceress’s former

apprentice?”

Duncan nodded. “From the image I was just sent, I would say it’s her.” He brought it up for Randor to see as they continued walking quickly down the steps.

The grainy still image of the yellow-skinned woman that projected out from Duncan’s left gauntlet caused a look of recognition to pass over King Randor’s face. “She looks a bit different, but I would also say that it is her. Damn! If only the Sorceress were not a prisoner of Castle Grayskull, she could aid us. The curse that keeps her there is Evelyn’s doing, or so I’ve heard.”

Duncan nodded solemnly. The Sorceress of Grayskull would indeed have been a great ally in this battle. “Maybe Evelyn served Hordak all along?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” Randor answered.

“Do you think that Keldor may have something to do with this?”

The king’s face went as stone. The thought hadn’t occurred to him. Keldor was Randor’s older brother. He had been banished long ago by his father Miro, before Randor had been born. During Miro’s adventures throughout Tellus as a young man, he met a woman named Nira and had fallen in love with her. Nira was a Gar, a rare blue skinned race that the Eternians often found themselves at odds with for a variety of reasons, even to the point of war.

His father banished Nira and their son, due to the pressures of the Eternian people which had escalated to violent protests. Though Randor did not agree with the choice his father had made, he found it hard to judge the man whom he had known only as a loving parent. His brother Keldor had been but a ghost to Randor as a child and, after dealing with him later on as an adult, upon his father’s death, Randor often wondered if Miro hadn’t been right to cast him out after all. One of Randor’s first acts as king was to seek out Keldor and return his brother, no more than a stranger, to his place in the palace as an Eternian lord.

Randor and his brother had gotten along quite well in the early years of his return, but over time their relationship soured and Keldor made many terrible choices. One of those choices was that Keldor had sworn to kill both Randor and his wife Marlena in his quest for the throne. While at one time the Eternian king had thought to redeem Keldor, Randor’s fear for the lives of his newborn children kept any thoughts of seeking his brother out at bay. The man he thought he had known was gone. Randor felt that Keldor had been twisted not only by the unfortunate circumstances of his upbringing, but by his own study of magic, into a cruel and covetous man. While he was unsure of magic’s true role in his brother’s fall, it had made Randor wary of sorcery in any of its many forms. Although they had shared good times along with the bad, Randor could not risk his children, even if Keldor had somehow changed, which was unlikely, in any case.

After a moment's hesitation, Randor answered Duncan's question. "While it's true that Evelyn once served Keldor, we have heard nothing of either of them in nearly a decade. If Keldor were going to make a move on the kingdom, it would have happened years ago. More than that, if it were Keldor, there would be no question. He would want me to know it was him."

"I'm sorry to have brought it up, Sire, but I thought it pertinent to our battle strategies if-

"I understand, Duncan," Randor said, cutting his friend off. "Leave it be and don't burden yourself. My brother is gone." Reaching the bottom of the stairwell, they opened the door to the outside of the tower and Randor nodded to the two guards at its base. "Guard this tower with your lives," he ordered.

Looking out over the battlefield that his kingdom had become, Randor saw that the fight was already nearly on top of them. The smell of smoke was prominent, as the Horde troopers had set fire to many of the homes within the walls. Screams filled the night as the capitol city of his kingdom was ravaged. As fast as he and Duncan had made their way, Randor felt they should have been faster. A steely look came over the king's face as he regarded his friend. Their reinforcements would not arrive in time. At this point it didn't matter. "My friend, there is nothing else to do but fight. Let us go into battle, as we have so many times in the past."

"Together?"

"Together."

"Yes, Sire!"

They rushed into the massive melee and while Randor slashed at the Horde soldiers with his sword, Duncan smashed some with his giant mace and blasted others with lasers from the right gauntlet of his magnificent armor. As they made their way deeper into the fray, it quickly became apparent that the remnants of the Eternian army that had not been called away were more than simply outmatched. They were being slaughtered. Green fireballs streaked though the air from the staff of Evil-Lyn, who had certainly grown much more powerful. The wicked smile that curled her lips upward showed that she was enjoying herself.

While her own magic was devastating enough, she was not alone. The skull-faced sorcerer who accompanied her shot purple lightning from his hands, tearing into the nearby Eternian soldiers, their faces twisting in terror as they fell writhing to the ground. The hooded villain looked in his direction, staring at Randor with empty eye sockets that blazed red with a magic fire deep in their recesses. For a moment, Randor felt as if he knew the man, but that was impossible. That skull made for a face one wouldn't easily forget. He definitely would have remembered meeting this particular sorcerer.

Randor felt the blood drain from his face when the sorcerer pulled the Sword of Darkness from a sheath on his back and decapitated one of the Eternian soldiers. Randor had not heard anything of Keldor in many years, this was true, but one of the things that he had known of his brother since his banishment was that he was the sole possessor of that sword. Evelyn had helped him procure it when she betrayed the Sorceress of Grayskull. It was one half of the legendary Sword of Power and its presence in this battle was unexpected, to say the least. What did it mean? How had it come to be in this sorcerer's possession? Anger swept over Randor, who feared he knew the answer.

The sorcerer turned away from Randor, ignoring the Eternian king as the creature headed further into the battle. Before he could take more than ten steps, the Eternian ruler rushed the invader and leapt at him from behind, his sword slashing down at Skeletor who somehow sensed the attack and blocked it with the Sword of Darkness.

"Familiar weapon, Skull-faced One." Randor grimaced as they pushed against each other, swords locked.

"A token from a fallen foe, dear king." His voice came out in a mixture of an icy whisper and a cackle of laughter. "And the name is 'Skeletor!'" He took a step back and swung the sword in a sharp downward arc at Randor who blocked it with a shield that materialized out of his armor, a trick of mechanics conceived by Duncan. Randor's deliberate and nearly decade long shunning of magic within the kingdom had proven to be a boon to the Eternian Man-At-Arms, whose technological expertise had blossomed in its absence. Duncan's mechanical weaponry had become standard issue for the Eternian Royal Guard. It didn't seem to impress Skeletor in the slightest.

"If that is true, Skeletor, know that the one who wielded it was once very dear to me. You shall pay handsomely for his death." Randor swung again.

"Will I?" Skeletor cackled again loudly, blocking Randor's attack with ease. As their weapons entwined, the Sword of Darkness glowed with power and a blast of magical lightning leapt from it, striking Randor in the chest. The king was thrown several feet back and fell in a heap. Skeletor glanced down at his foe disdainfully as smoke wafted from Randor's red and gold armor. "Idiot."

Seeing Randor fall, Duncan cried out for his lifelong friend. He rushed Skeletor from behind and attacked with his mace, but Evil-Lyn intercepted the swing with her staff. "You... traitor!" Duncan spat the words at the woman.

"Thank you for the compliment, Man-At-Arms, for it truly is an honor to destroy this pitiful and self-righteous kingdom. I've been waiting for this moment for a long time." Evil-Lyn grinned as she saw her words anger him.

Skeletor glanced back toward where Randor had fallen, but the man was

gone. Looking beyond the spot where he had once been, the sorcerer saw the king fleeing the battle. "Coward."

■ ■ ■

Randor knew the battle was lost. The majority of Eternia's army was in Avion, far too distant to be of any help now, and the rest would not arrive in time. The Horde must have used magic to land deep within the Eternian border and this had put the element of surprise on their side. This was less of a battle than it was an ambush. The Royal Guard now made up the majority of Eternia's defense and they were outnumbered and overpowered by Hordak's troops. Despite this, Randor had to keep fighting, no matter what. But he had to be smarter about it. His family was depending on him. Rushing headlong into this fight, as fitting as it may have been for one who was a warrior as a young man, reminded him that he was not as young as he once was. Nearly getting himself killed wasn't doing his men or his family any favors. Randor looked back and saw that Duncan was busy battling that evil witch, but he had to trust that his friend could handle himself.

Randor had seen the Horde leader, Hordak, earlier, but the dark lord had seemed content in biding his time in the background, watching his two lieutenants, Evil-Lyn and Skeletor, make quick work of the Eternian Royal Guard. As Randor surveyed the battlefield, he saw that that was no longer the case. Hordak was on the move, and he was heading toward the nearest tower, toward Randor's family. Making the situation even worse, Skeletor had turned and followed his master. As much as Randor hated to leave the immediate battle, he had no choice. He had to protect his wife and children. He could not let a royal bloodline that had existed for a thousand years be wiped out in a single night.

■ ■ ■

"Where are you going, Hordak? The battle is behind us." Skeletor gestured needlessly to the smoking ruins and screams coming from their rear.

Hordak kept his pace steady, not even turning to face his lieutenant. "I'm going to get what I came for, fool."

"The throne room is in the other direction."

"That's not what I came for." Hordak calmly used his magic to crush the two guards at the base of the tower before exploding the door itself into wooden shards

with a simple gesture of his armored hand. He began to work his way up the stairs.

Skeletor followed, furious. "Will you tell me what it is you've come for then?"

"His children."

Skeletor froze. "His children?"

"Yes. I have seen them in visions. They will grow to be very powerful. I will have them as my apprentices to replace you and your wench, who will no doubt only attempt to betray me yet again. It is your nature."

Skeletor's body shook angrily, Hordak's words reminding him of an old failure. He began climbing again. "So this whole invasion, the sacking of the kingdom, it was all a ruse to steal squealing infants?"

Hordak continued his climb. "Yes."

"Then why bring the army at all? Why not just open a portal to the tower and take them?"

"It was a test."

"Of the soldiers?"

Hordak turned back briefly, staring deep into Skeletor's empty eye sockets. "No. Of you. And you have failed." He turned back toward the steps and continued his ascent.

Skeletor fumed. "Failed? I don't understand how I could have failed. Victory is assured!"

"The Horde's victory is always assured. You have failed because you still see fit to question my decisions. I demand your unwavering loyalty. You are a tool, a weapon in my arsenal. It is not your place to question me. Doing so proves you still feel you have no master other than yourself."

"Then what of Evil-Lyn and myself?" Skeletor demanded.

"You will remain here until I call for you."

"And what if I refuse to answer?" he asked, defiantly.

"Then I will destroy you."

Skeletor laughed, causing Hordak to pause momentarily and glance over his shoulder at his old apprentice. "You find this amusing, Skeletor?"

The skull-faced sorcerer cackled once again. “Of course it is! You are the fool here, Hordak! What about Grayskull? I already have one half of the Sword of Power! You’re throwing away a chance to rule the universe for babies!”

Hordak scoffed. “I already rule much of it now. This planet and its inner power may be of importance to you, but to me it is merely another speck in the cosmos. Conquering Eternia has never been my goal, at least not for many thousands of years. You have always lacked foresight, Skeletor. The children will be powerful. Very powerful. And unlike you, I have the patience to wait for them to achieve their true potential. For countless years I have lived in this body. Waiting another few decades means little to me. I have, however, been meaning to do this for quite some time.” Hordak quickly turned and backhanded Skeletor, the sudden attack knocking the skull-faced sorcerer down the spiral staircase, tumbling violently several stories to the ground below. Hordak turned back and headed up the stairs once again, making his way to the room where Queen Marlena hid with her children, the heirs of Grayskull.

■ ■ ■

Randor dashed into the tower and saw Skeletor’s mangled body at the base of the steps, a broken mess. “A fitting end for your killer, Keldor,” he said aloud as he leapt over the body. He rushed up the staircase as fast as his armor would allow and saw the crushed bodies of Kyron and Thrahn at the doorway of the tower’s peak. The door to the room that held his wife and children was now in shattered fragments that littered the top steps. He stepped in a pool of blood as he reached the stairway’s apex.

A chill shot down Randor’s spine as he burst into the room, immediately seeing more bodies littering the floor. He felt his heart quicken its pace before he saw that Marlena and his children were still alive. The Queen was suspended in the air by some type of magic spell before she was thrown violently back and to the floor. She lay motionless, surrounded by the dead who had fallen in their failed attempts to protect her. Randor felt a pain in his chest as he stared at her still form. He turned and his face went pale with shock and fear as Hordak stood with a babe in each arm. “What are you doing, you monster?!”

“What does it look like, King Randor?” Hordak smiled, the movement contorting his alien face in such a way that it looked even more terrifying. “I’m stealing your children.”

Randor rushed the sorcerer, but was blown back by a sudden gale force wind. It was unnatural, and he knew it had to be Hordak’s doing. As much as he struggled, he could not get close enough to stop the creature as it raised both of

his children in its armored hands. Looking back and forth from one child to the other, Hordak seemed to be appraising them. A look of surprise followed by one of disgust crossed his face as he looked at the babe in his left hand. Turning his attention to the one in his right, a small smile appeared, twisting his monstrous face in that unnatural way once again. He tossed the child in his left hand toward Randor, who used all of his might to catch it safely as he fought against the winds that tore through the tower. It was the boy, Adam, in Randor's arms. The king's eyes shot daggers toward Hordak, who still carried his other child, now held tight to the monster's armored chest. "Adora!"

Hordak leapt to the sill of the window, all that much closer to a newly opened portal outside, its magical power sending even greater winds into the room, whipping his red cloak violently. "You may keep that one," Hordak laughed. His voice was guttural and loud, even over the roar of the wind, "but you'll never see this child again!"

"Adora!!!" Randor screamed her name again in pure agony as the sorcerer fell back out of the window and disappeared through the portal as it closed, back to wherever he had come from. The king held his son tight as tears rolled down his face.

■ ■ ■

Skeletor, his body magically regenerated due to an old spell, stumbled out of the tower and back into the battlefield, or at least what had once been a battlefield. The Horde army was gone, the Eternian soldiers seemingly as shocked as he was that their enemies had disappeared en masse. Evil-Lyn rushed toward him. "What in the blazes just happened, Skeletor?"

He growled in anger. "Hordak betrayed us."

"Well, we're stuck here," she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "He's closed all of the portals to Etheria. We can't return. There's no way to know if that's even where they went." She glanced to her left and saw the remaining Eternian Royal Guardsmen spot them. The soldiers began working their way toward where the two of them stood.

Skeletor seethed. "Perhaps now's not the time for discussion, my dear. I'll have my revenge on Hordak some day, and Randor as well. But it appears that it won't be today, after all." Skeletor raised his arms and opened a portal in the air. He stepped through its swirling vortex to the land beyond with Evil-Lyn close behind him, the taste of defeat souring both of their mouths.

■ ■ ■

The next two days passed in a blur of reports and rumors for King Randor as his men searched for his daughter and her kidnapper. Much to Randor's relief, Queen Marlana had merely been knocked unconscious and had fully healed, at least physically, from Hordak's attack. Mentally, however, they were both still wounded. Despite all attempts to find Adora, there had been no concrete evidence of her whereabouts. For all intents and purposes, she and Hordak had simply disappeared, along with the rest of the Horde army. In the end, the Sorceress of Grayskull and other mages and magic-workers friendly to Eternia had confirmed that they were no longer on Tellus. The mages had learned one thing, however. Skeletor was somehow alive and was still here. His presence was strong and easily sensed by the magic-wielders, though they could not pin down his exact location. His brother's murderer and the witch that followed him had most likely gone to the Dark Hemisphere where the foulest of evils dwelled.

No one knew where the invading army had come from, or why the attack had ended so suddenly. The Horde had been winning. Eternos Palace was theirs. Eternia was theirs. But instead Hordak had taken something much more precious, something that caused Randor more agony than the loss of a thousand kingdoms. He had taken his child, Adora, and soon, very soon, Hordak's skull-faced lieutenant would regret ever having been a part of something that caused Randor such pain. The Eternian king felt the conviction he held on his course of action harden and settle into place within his heart. Nothing would stop him from achieving his goal. Skeletor would die.

-THEN-

PART II

It had been a week since the horrible battle that caused King Randor to lose his daughter to a mad conqueror from another realm. Hordak was gone and he'd taken Adora with him. Wherever the evil creature had escaped to, Randor could not follow. He could, however, bring his wrath down upon Skeletor, Hordak's former lieutenant, seemingly cast aside and abandoned here by the Horde leader. The past week, for many, had been spent in mourning and attending memorial services for the dead. Nearly every Eternian living in the capitol city had lost family and friends to the whim of that black armored conqueror and his lieutenants. Coupled with the loss of livestock and entire crops due to the spread of fires set by the Horde troopers, it would be some time before Eternia fully recovered from this attack. For Randor, this past week had also been filled with various reports and planning, and a need for vengeance.

The Eternian people were now in a constant state of panic and paranoia, fearful of the Horde's sudden return. Much of the Eternian army was still needed in Avion, their ally in dire need of assistance in their battle against the Aquarians. Duncan had bolstered the city's defenses with the remainder of the army, bringing in those who normally defended Eternia's borders. With the Horde's ability to simply appear, defending the borders no longer served much purpose, at least when it came to the defense of the capitol city. Armed soldiers regularly patrolled

the city within view of every citizen. Randor knew the battle was over. The presence of the soldiers was more for the comfort of his people than it was for true safety or defense.

While Randor stood with Duncan in Eternos Palace's war room, a regiment of his best men was preparing for a march into the Dark Hemisphere, something that had not happened in centuries. A bizarre mixture of nearly uninhabitable wasteland and dense jungle, the Dark Hemisphere was a place where no one trod lightly, and an army marching on it was nearly unheard of. It was home to only the nastiest of Tellus's creatures for a reason: they were cruel enough to be able to survive it.

Regardless of the dangers it posed to himself and his men, Randor could not stop himself from launching an assault on Skeletor. Rumors were already spreading throughout the surrounding villages about the Dark Hemisphere's newest inhabitant. According to the villagers who lived near the border, a skull-faced man had been seen by local farmers, who ventured cautiously to collect a particular berry that only grew on the twisted plains of the Dark Hemisphere. If they were to be believed, and Randor saw no reason why they would invent such a story, then Skeletor had indeed traveled there and had made Snake Mountain his home.

Only days after the loss of her child, Randor's wife Marlena was grief-stricken and inconsolable. Randor would do anything to see her smile again. If that smile came from the news that Randor and his army had destroyed the skeletal sorcerer who had been working with Hordak, so be it.

As Randor and Duncan pored over a map of the Dark Hemisphere, no doubt outdated as no one had thoroughly charted it in hundreds of years, they saw the map shimmer and change. Startled, both men stepped back, but Randor felt relief wash over him as the face of the Sorceress appeared in a magic veil, a window into her home of Castle Grayskull. Her feathered headdress shimmered in the image. Beneath it, her eyes held a wisdom that defied her youthful appearance. Before he could ask her why she'd appeared, she spoke. Her voice sounded soft and vulnerable, as it always did, a stark contrast to the power she wielded. "Randor, you mustn't journey to the Dark Hemisphere."

Immediately, Randor felt his fists clench involuntarily. He respected the Sorceress and appreciated her counsel, but this was neither the time nor the place for such a suggestion. "Why is that, Sorceress?" he asked. "I hear no sorrow in your voice for my loss, nor any condolences offered, and yet you feel fit to tell me to not avenge the theft of my daughter?"

The Sorceress's eyes registered some small surprise, but gave away little else. "I am sorry, Randor. While it has only been a few years since I walked freely across the lands of Tellus, before I took on the lonely honor and burden of my duty here, I know that the power of Grayskull has changed me. I may have forgotten

how it feels to be human, at least in some respects. I do not mean to be so forward, but it is of the utmost importance. I am not as cold as you would think. I am sorry for your loss. It is my caring for you and your family that causes me to beseech you to not undertake this journey.”

Randor shook his head. “Why? What could the destruction of Skeletor be other than a benefit to this kingdom?” He looked her deep in the eyes. “Surely, he’ll attack again. You know this.”

She returned his gaze, but betrayed no emotion, despite her words. “Because I fear that if you follow the path to revenge you will not escape it unharmed.”

“The man kidnapped my child!” the king shouted angrily. He pounded his fist on the table, rattling his sword, which had been laid across it. Duncan remained silent, but placed his right hand on Randor’s shoulder in an effort to calm his friend.

“Hordak, not Skeletor, took Adora,” she said, matter of factly.

Randor nodded solemnly. “Yes. He did. However, since Hordak has escaped my grasp, I shall have my vengeance on the one I can reach.”

The Sorceress of Grayskull sighed, a rare sign of emotion from her. “I feel you are lashing out in an attempt to cover your own emotions. Think of me as cold if you must, but vengeance is not the answer and you are not the type of man to seek it. Your wife and son don’t need Skeletor dead, Randor, they need a husband and a father. The people of Eternia need their ruler. That is what you need to be in this time. Your days of fighting are over. You have more important responsibilities now, far beyond those of the kingdom. Adam will be of vast importance to Eternia, I have foreseen this. Hordak rejected him because of the light he saw within his soul, a light that even he could not extinguish. Randor, if you attempt to kill Skeletor, you will be destroyed. He is more powerful than you can imagine. I cannot allow this to happen. Adam needs his father, a man to guide him and shape him into the man he will be.”

Randor looked down, away from her eyes. “He’s just a babe. He needs his mother now. Not me.”

“As all parents learn, he will be grown before you know it and by that time it may be too late.” She paused, contemplating. “What if there were another way?”

He shut his eyes and forced himself to be patient. “What do you mean?”

She answered, her soft voice sounding young and innocent, though Randor knew better. She was at least as old as he was. “I can use my power, amplified by Grayskull, to create a mystic barrier, walling off the Dark Hemisphere from the Light. Skeletor will not be able to breach it and he will no longer be a danger to

your family.”

Randor frowned. “And you would rob me of my vengeance.”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “No. I will not agree to this. Forgive me, Sorceress, but what is left of my army will march at dawn. We will make our way to the Dark Hemisphere and Skeletor will pay for what he has done.” Randor turned and stormed out of the room, ignoring the Sorceress’s mystic veil, and anything else she had to say, slamming the large oak door behind him.

The guardian of Grayskull watched him leave. She understood his loss, but the kingdom needed to be protected, along with Randor himself, although he didn’t know it. He did not see bits and pieces of the future, as she did. Randor was a strong and mighty king, in many ways a man in his prime, but he did not understand the darkness that threatened his kingdom, and indeed all of Tellus. She looked at Duncan, who merely shrugged his shoulders. They began to speak, alone, searching for ways to stop Randor from making such a costly mistake.

■ ■ ■

The next morning, Randor and Duncan led what remained of the Eternian army toward the Dark Hemisphere. Due to the losses they’d sustained and much of the army still being needed in Avion, their numbers were small. A scant twenty or so men still in fighting shape accompanied the Eternian king and Man-At-Arms as they made their way to Snake Mountain. They rode on horseback, a slower means of travel than mechanical transportation. Randor felt that the horses would be better suited to traverse the uneven terrain. It had been many years since he’d been on the Dark Hemisphere of the planet, during a time when Eternia had been at war.

War was never uncommon in Randor’s kingdom, as Eternia was unique among its neighboring kingdoms and villages. Despite Eternia’s war-torn past, it had become a hub of knowledge and learning throughout the last century. Many would travel great distances to visit Eternia, which was now known for having churned out nearly as many scholars as it had warriors.

His kingdom was located on a planet called “Tellus” which was itself part of a large solar system of planets. Many of its sister planets also supported life and had their own unique races and creatures. Representatives of each of these races would often come to Tellus, for it had long been believed to hold some strange magical power that the others did not possess. Known for being technologically

advanced, as many of the others were, Tellus still had a culture steeped in magic, which was considered nothing but folklore among the other inhabitants of its solar system. But none could deny that magic was very much alive on Tellus.

Unfortunately this had also made Tellus a target throughout its history, and there were many occasions in which some nefarious force had tried to control it. More than once, those attempts led to disaster. Eons ago, the planet was nearly split in two, forcing it permanently out of balance and forming two hemispheres, one dark and one light. Eternia was located on the Light Hemisphere, dangerously near the border between the two. Throughout its history, Randor's homeland had often found itself having to repel the forces of evil that constantly struggled to control Tellus, creeping from the Dark Hemisphere where they dwelled.

Considered to be the nexus of Tellus's power, Castle Grayskull nearly straddled the planet's vertical equator. This had long made Randor's life, and the lives of his forefathers difficult. Eternos Palace, which the Eternian royal family had called home for generations, stood mere miles away from Grayskull. Due to its proximity to the castle, it has fallen on the kingdom of Eternia to protect it from evil forces who would give anything to take it. For generations, the kingdom has been alone in this task, joined only by the Sorceress of Grayskull, its lone inhabitant. A role played by many women over the centuries, the current Sorceress regarded Randor and his finest warriors as friends.

With his father's death more than a decade ago, the series of battles known as the Great Unrest began. The most notable of these battles had been against Count Marzo. The mad wizard had sought control over Eternia for reasons unknown and it would be the first time that Randor would fight alongside his then recently returned brother. Keldor and Randor's budding friendship was tested during this battle, as Keldor sought to learn the ways of magic through Marzo's library. Randor disagreed with his brother's decision, fearing it would lead Keldor down a dark path. Despite this tension, the sons of Miro were victorious in the end and Marzo gave up on his conquest of Eternia, fleeing into the outlying territories. The brothers' victory would come with a price, however, as Keldor stole Marzo's books of magic and began to immerse himself in the dark arts of sorcery, often locking himself away for days at a time to study the forbidden texts.

Years passed with little incident. Keldor was happy to have a home, and Randor felt the presence of his brother as a boon to him, a way to erase the memory of his father's banishment of Keldor and his mother. Although there were times of happiness following the war with Count Marzo, the Eternian people's growing fear of Keldor was not unwarranted. On one fateful day, Keldor attacked Randor in an attempt to gain control of the crown, which he felt was rightfully his. Keldor lost in this attempt.

Randor seldom heard of his brother since their battle, Keldor having disappeared shortly thereafter. Although he feared for the safety of his family, and anyone else that stood in the way of Keldor's claim to the throne, Randor also still

loved his brother and hoped, if he were not dead, that he could change and forget his rage, to one day return to his side. He dreamt of the day that whatever spell had wormed its way into his brother and changed him could be undone. With each year that passed, however, Randor felt that hope wither and die just a little bit more. Now, with the revelation that Skeletor was in possession of the Sword of Darkness, he felt as if even that faint possibility had been taken away from him.

“Sire, may I ask a question?” Duncan turned toward his king, his voice rousing the man from his distant memories.

Randor’s thoughts often drifted toward his brother, and recent events had only increased their frequency. “You are always free to speak, Duncan, and yet you always ask me for permission.”

“Only out of respect.”

“I know, my friend. What is it?”

Duncan paused, collecting his thoughts before he spoke. “Do you think that taking on this battle is wise?”

Randor stared straight ahead as his horse whinnied and made its way toward their destination. “Our enemies number only two, a far cry from our last battle. I have faith in our men.”

Duncan regarded the king cautiously, not wanting to sound like a coward, but more importantly, not wanting to anger his friend. “Yes, but even numbering only two, those enemies are powerful and our men are afraid of them after losing many friends to their evil magic.”

“Do they not appreciate this chance to avenge those deaths?”

Duncan sighed. “Some do, yes, but not all are as eager for it as you.”

Randor closed his eyes. “They took my daughter, Duncan. What if it had been Teela?”

Duncan eyes lowered, saddened for his friend’s loss. “Honestly, I don’t know what I would do. I would try to avenge her, I suppose.” He glanced back to Randor. “Unlike you, however, I have no other child, nor do I have a wife waiting for me at home. No one else depends on me for their survival. And what I absolutely would not do is ask others to go with me to certain death for the sake of my own personal vengeance.”

Randor slowed his horse and took in the image of his oldest friend doubting him for the first time. He replied angrily, “My authority is without question. If you and the men wish to turn around, feel free to do so, but I will continue to march

until I arrive at Snake Mountain. My wife—your queen—sits at home and weeps. She sleeps rarely. The kingdom has lost its princess. Skeletor must pay for this. More than that, he didn't just take my daughter, Duncan, he—" Randor stopped, contemplating whether he should speak his thoughts aloud. "He may have killed Keldor."

"I'm sorry to hear that if it is true, Sire, but don't forget that Keldor was a threat, as well."

"I haven't."

"Good. And don't think for a second that your men, including myself, would not follow you to the ends of Tellus, for whatever reason. But as your friend, I cannot sit idly by and watch as vengeance consumes your heart. You are an example to which we all aspire. You have a responsibility to—"

"I didn't ask to be king, Duncan," Randor said, cutting his friend off.

"No, Sire, and yet you are, with all that it entails. Whether by your will or not, that is who you are, and no king should ask those whom he considers friends to die for the sake of his revenge. Skeletor and Evil-Lyn are more than this small regiment can handle. You are sending these men to their deaths. And for what? Vengeance? This ruling by the heart, and not the mind, is exactly what your father warned you against when we were boys." They were silent for several minutes before Duncan spoke again. "Do you think it's my fault?"

Randor eyed his friend. "Of course not. Why would it be?"

"I wasn't prepared for that kind of an attack. If I had thought of an army arriving due to a mystical portal, I could have tried to find a way to negate it."

"You weren't prepared because we didn't know it was possible. It is not your fault, my friend."

"Then how can it be yours? You act as if you somehow failed your people and your family when, as far as I see it, you did everything you possibly could."

They were approaching the border of the Dark Hemisphere when Randor stopped his horse, the men behind them following suit. "Perhaps you are right, Duncan, about my father's lessons. But it has been a long time since we were children, playing in the palace. I do not feel like the man I used to be. How can I? My entire life has changed because of this event. How can I let that stand? How can I abide evil in this world when it's within my power to stop it? How can I not protect my wife and remaining child?"

Duncan looked ahead as he spoke. "Then let the Sorceress erect her wall."

Randor raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I take it you two continued to talk after I left?"

His friend looked at him and sighed slightly. "Yes. We did."

"I didn't realize the Sorceress held you in such high regard. She usually doesn't talk to mortal men like us."

Duncan shrugged his shoulders. "We have an arrangement of sorts. She asked me for a favor years ago, just as she asked one of you last night. The task that I undertook for her has brightened my life considerably. I can only believe that by asking me to approach you once again with this alternative solution, that she wishes to do the same for you."

Randor thought back to a time years earlier, when Duncan's daughter first came into his life. "Teela?"

Duncan nodded. "Yes, Sire. The Sorceress is the one who brought her into my care."

Randor was silent for a moment. "I was not aware. But do you not see, Duncan? Can you not imagine if it had been her?"

"Yes, Sire, I can. That is why I will go with you. To the end, if need be."

"Thank you, Duncan. I know you care. I understand that. This, however, is something that I must do."

Duncan held Randor's eyes, one father to another. "I understand, and I will follow you." He paused in an effort to add weight to his next words. "But as Man-At-Arms, I cannot allow you to bring these men."

Randor sighed. "You are right, of course. You are ever my conscience, old friend. Are you sure you wish to join me?"

"You would never be able to convince me otherwise."

Randor forced a smile to his comrade before sending the Royal Guard back to Eterna. If he and Duncan died this day, then Adam would become king, his mother ruling until he was of age. The Royal Guard's duty was now to them. Some of the men protested amongst themselves, but would not defy a direct order. Randor knew that this march was foolish. It didn't take a stern talk from Duncan to convince him of that. Still, it was something he felt he had to do, for the honor of his daughter. As his men turned and left, Randor nodded to Duncan solemnly and they were off again, off towards an end. Either Skeletor's end, or their own.

■ ■ ■

“Interesting.” Evil-Lyn peered into the orb upon her staff. Within it, she saw an image of Randor and his men approaching Snake Mountain. The local rumors were true, as she and Skeletor had indeed made their home there.

Skeletor sat upon an old throne and stroked his pet, Panthor. The darkly furred giant cat sat contentedly beside him, his large frame making him sit almost as high as Skeletor himself. “What is it?”

Evil-Lyn looked up at him, a wry smile on her face. “The Eternian king is coming here.”

“Randor?” Skeletor asked, curious.

Evil-Lyn rolled her eyes slightly. “Yes, of course, Randor.”

Skeletor chuckled and waved his hand dismissively. “I’m just surprised, my dear. Randor, as far as I know, has not journeyed this far into the Dark Hemisphere since the Great Unrest.”

Evil-Lyn waved her hand over the orb and the image faded. “Upset about his daughter, I would imagine.”

Skeletor rose and walked down a small set of steps to join Evil-Lyn on the floor of the throne room, his hooded cloak flowing behind him. “Yes. I see Hordak has not only abandoned us here, but he’s left us his mess, as well.”

Evil-Lyn nodded. “He’s with his Man-At-Arms, but otherwise they are alone.”

Skeletor cocked his head to the side, amused. “Alone? They are either very brave, or very stupid.”

She smiled. “Should we greet them?”

The skull-faced sorcerer pulled the Sword of Darkness from its sheath on his back. The enchanted weapon glowed slightly, anticipating another battle. “Yes. I think we should.”

■ ■ ■

Randor suppressed a chill as he and Duncan approached Snake Mountain, perhaps a mile into the Dark Hemisphere. It was not a chill from cold, as this area

of the planet was quite hot, with small streams of molten rock surrounding them. No, this was different. For lack of a better term, this land was evil. A vile stench pervaded this place, a mixture of sulfur and rotting flesh that the Eternian king could swear was pressing against him, trying to work its way into the pores of his skin. Approaching Snake Mountain, Randor took in the eerie sight. The mountain's name was earned due to the serpentine stone structure that wrapped its way around the mountain itself, peaking into the shape of a head jutting out near the top, a stream of lava rushing from its mouth in a blazing waterfall. As he gazed at it, Randor contemplated its history.

Legends said that Snake Mountain was once actually the snake god, Serpos, whom the Snake Men of Preternian history worshiped with fervor and violent sacrifice. The tales said that Serpos had been frozen there, turned to stone, and that the fortress that remained was actually constructed within his ancient body. The Snake Men were long gone, banished for generations, but Snake Mountain remained, a foreboding presence even in the midst of the evil surrounding it. He thought it seemed a fitting place for Skeletor to adopt as his home, as it was unlikely that even the wild beasts of the Dark Hemisphere would venture inside. Even here, it was known as a place to fear.

Upon approaching the base of the mountain, Randor was surprised to see Evil-Lyn and Skeletor walking out to meet them from the opening of the fortress. Apparently, sneaking up on Skeletor in secret was not possible. The skull-faced sorcerer and his witch obviously had ways of knowing they had visitors.

Skeletor had the Sword of Darkness already drawn, its power showing in an eerie purple glow that surrounded it. "Ahh, Randor. What a nice surprise. Here to save me the trip to Eternos Palace to kill you?"

Randor sat upon his horse, straining inwardly to remain calm, the animal nervous and panting below him from the heat of the volcanic mountain. "Enough, Skeletor. Where is my daughter?"

"Even if I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me."

"Where?!" he roared.

Skeletor spun his weapon in his hands playfully. He looked bored. "If you're going to throw tantrums like that, why should I tell you anything?"

Randor began to wonder if Skeletor was mad, his mind lost, or if he was always this irritating. He drew his own sword. "Where, Sorcerer?"

"I suppose it won't hurt me to tell you, although I do enjoy seeing you in distress." He looked from his weapon back to the king. "What have I to gain from doing so?"

“My not lopping off your head.” As Randor said this, Duncan looked at his king with worry in his eyes. In all the years of their friendship, he’d never seen Randor this close to losing his self-control.

Skeletor chuckled. “Come now, Randor. You’d be dead before you could get within fifteen feet of me and you know it. You’re lucky, for today I’m in a giving mood.” Evil-Lyn glanced at Skeletor curiously. He ignored her. “The truth is...” he paused, drawing it out as much as possible, enjoying watching a bead of sweat slide down Randor’s cheek. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t believe you,” Randor said.

“I told you that you wouldn’t. Your daughter could be anywhere in a thousand galaxies. I don’t know where they’ve gone. Look at my face, son of Miro. Do I look like I’m lying?” Skeletor cackled, his skull-like visage terrifying and soulless.

Randor stirred, the sound of his father’s name coming from this creature from another dimension’s mouth surprising him. “How do you know of my father? Does the Horde study the history of every planet they seek to conquer?”

“I think you already know the answer to that and it’s not nearly as complicated as you would think.” Skeletor raised his sword slowly, turning it from side to side, admiring its luminescent power. He knew that Randor recognized it as his brother Keldor’s. “It’s surprising what a man will talk about when he’s in the throes of agony within a dark and lonely dungeon.”

“My brother,” Randor swallowed hard. “He’s alive?”

“Oh, yes, dear King. He’s very much alive. Well, half-alive, anyway.” The lower jaw of the skull opened suddenly. As a rush of laughter escaped its nonexistent throat, the sight of it chilled Randor to the bone.

“What have you done to him?”

“What have I done to him? Do you not remember? It was not I who cast him out. It was not I who forbade him to return. Did you never ask your precious Sorceress what she did to him? Or did she forget to mention her contribution to his suffering? Such a good king you are, caring for your brother so.”

Duncan saw his king stiffen upon hearing Skeletor’s poisonous words. “Don’t listen to him, Randor. Not a word of truth can come from his wicked mouth. He’s sowing lies and deceit in an effort to make you question your trust in the Sorceress.”

Skeletor gazed at Duncan coldly. “Am I, Man-At-Arms? Or are you too afraid to admit that she’s not the infallible being you perceive her to be?”

Duncan shook his head. "Enough. Come, my king. We've nothing to gain by this."

Randor looked at his friend with determined eyes. "No. I may not be able to save my daughter, but I may still be able save my brother. No matter what he's done, I need to help him. The more time that passes, the more convinced I become that he was twisted by Marzo's spell-books. He was not himself."

"Forgive me, Randor," Skeletor laughed again, "but is that what you really believe? I'm impressed at the lengths you will go to deceive yourself."

"Keep that bone jaw of yours shut, Sorcerer. I've heard enough of your voice to last me a lifetime." Randor spurred his horse into a gallop and rushed Skeletor, but just as the villain had predicted, the king was hit square in the chest with a blast of lightning from Evil-Lyn's staff, knocking him off of his steed to the steaming, lifeless ground below him.

Duncan launched his horse into a run in an attempt to intercept Skeletor as the villain approached his fallen friend. The Sword of Darkness glowed violently in the sorcerer's hand and Duncan could hear an ominous rumbling sound in the distance. Leaning sharply to the side of his steed, Duncan grabbed his king, throwing his unconscious body onto his horse behind him before turning and galloping back in the direction of Eternia. He could hear Skeletor and Evil-Lyn laughing in the distance behind them as Randor stirred. Duncan stopped and quickly helped Randor onto his own horse, which had followed them.

Randor glanced groggily toward his friend. "What are you doing, Duncan?"

"We're leaving, Sire," he answered quickly. "See for yourself," Duncan said as he pointed to Randor's right.

In the direction Duncan indicated, Randor saw a massive stone structure coming from the North, sweeping its way along the horizon. It was the Mystic Wall. The Sorceress was erecting it of her own accord. Suddenly sobered, Randor was furious. "Blast her!" Randor spurred his horse once more. He and Duncan rode as fast as their animals could manage. Suddenly he could think of nothing but his wife and son at Eternos Palace, waiting for him to return. What had he been thinking? What if they didn't make it back to the light side before the wall closed? What if he never saw his family again? And what of Duncan's daughter, Teela? Had he cost his friend the chance to see her grow into a woman?

As they rode, the wall rushed toward their path of escape. Randor feared that it was moving faster than they would be able to travel. He looked behind them and saw Skeletor and Evil-Lyn riding atop a massive purple dylinx cat, quickly gaining on Randor and his closest friend. Apparently having seen the wall and realizing its intentions, they pursued. Whether they were afraid of being trapped here, or whether they simply wanted to stop him and Duncan from escaping,

Randor did not know. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he prayed to the gods that they would make it. The rumble of the wall magically building from the debris of the land became louder and louder as it got ever nearer to closing them off from their home.

At full speed, they burst over the visible line that divided the two hemispheres, forcing their horses to leap over it seconds before the wall shut the evil place off at their backs. Randor heard Skeletor and Evil-Lyn cry out in desperation behind them. The sounds of them trying to breach it to no avail filled his ears as he and Duncan rode on. Their enemies were now trapped on the dark side of Tellus forever.

■ ■ ■

Castle Grayskull loomed large on the horizon as Randor and Duncan approached. The Sorceress had nearly trapped them on the Dark Hemisphere, away from their families, even endangering the Eternian kingdom. A rare site, the drawbridge to the old castle, which would have crumbled centuries ago if it were a normal structure not protected by magic, was down. The Sorceress stood at the center of the wooden bridge, the chasm it reached across seemingly bottomless. Neither of them spoke as they rode toward her.

Her silver hair was long, cascading down to her waist. Upon her head sat a large feathered headdress. Her gown was a pearlescent white accented with a silver breastplate, both ornately designed with ancient Preternian symbols. She gazed upon both of them as they approached, her face giving away no sign of emotion. “King Randor.” When he gave no answer, she turned to Duncan. “Greetings, Man-At-Arms. How is your little one?”

The large man nodded. “Greetings, Sorceress. She is well, thank you.”

She spread her hands to her sides, palms open, indicating the drawbridge at her feet. “Both of you please feel free to come down and join me.”

As they dismounted, Randor was unsure of how to compose himself. He was torn between the anger he felt with her for her actions and the shame that he felt for almost leaving his wife and son without a husband and father, and young Teela as well. “You erected the wall.”

“Yes.”

Randor waited but no more seemed to be forthcoming. “Why? I explicitly told you that it was not to be.”

She looked deep into his eyes and he felt the power that seemed to surge from her. "Forgive me, King Randor, but at no point did I seek permission, nor do I require your blessing. I tried to show you that any journey to Snake Mountain would be folly, but you ignored my warnings."

"Your predecessor would have respected my wishes," he said angrily.

"And she would have been wrong. You are king of Eternia, true, but the Sorceress of Grayskull answers to no power other than that of Grayskull itself."

"But it is my very kingdom that you threatened by doing so."

"How is that?"

"You nearly trapped Eternia's king and its Man-At-Arms on the Dark Hemisphere!" he shouted, exasperated.

"I told you not to go. That was your own doing."

"My wife and son were almost left alone."

She nodded. "At no fault of my own, Randor. You are the one who made the decision to march on Snake Mountain. You are the one who brought Duncan, though I know he would not have had it otherwise. Do not project your poor choices onto me. In the end, you were not trapped. Something, by the way, that I would not have allowed to happen. I am wounded that you would think so."

Randor felt his right fist clenching and unclenching repeatedly. "You have robbed me of my vengeance," he seethed.

"Yes, and I will not apologize for it. Look at my choice as being one of naivety if you must, but I have saved your life. You are not a vengeful man, Randor. You are a good man, and you will be a wonderful father. Go. Look upon the wall as a gift." She gestured in the wall's direction, still visible in the distance. "A gift of peace. A peace that you can raise your son in with little fear, for Skeletor and his ilk are no longer a threat to you or your kingdom."

"You don't understand. Skeletor, he—" Randor stopped to take a breath and regain his composure. "Skeletor may know the whereabouts of my brother, Keldor."

She raised her eyebrows curiously. "Keldor? Why are you concerned over his fate? He was lost to you, was he not? Did he not swear to destroy you and all those you hold dear?"

"I am becoming more and more convinced that he was twisted by Marzo's magic. He was obsessed with those cursed books and parchments. What if we

could save him? Bring him back to us? Is it not true that you know what happened to him? That you had a hand in his fate, as Skeletor has said?”

If she knew of the situation Skeletor had spoken of, her face gave nothing away. “Skeletor’s words are poison. Do not believe them.”

“But is it true? Is he alive and imprisoned by that monster?” He pointed in the direction of Snake Mountain, no longer visible past the great wall that now stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction.

“Forgive me, King Randor, but the loss of your daughter, I fear, has left a hole that you feel you need to fill. Keldor is gone, a product of his own poor decisions. You are a wise man. Do not follow in his footsteps by making your own.”

Randor fumed. He stepped toward the Sorceress and jabbed his finger against her icy breastplate. “If you were still flesh and blood, you might have the heart to understand. My child is gone. How can you know what it’s like to lose the most precious thing in your world? Can you even imagine?” He stared deep into her eyes as they quickly flicked to Duncan standing beside him before returning to his. “You cannot possibly understand what it is like to give up something like that. Keep your cursed wall. If you are so powerful and all knowing, you can fend for yourself. I am returning to Eternia. The days of our protecting Castle Grayskull and whatever mystery may or may not be inside of it are over. Farewell, Sorceress.” He turned and mounted his steed, riding back in the direction of Eternia.

Duncan hesitated at the edge of the chasm that surrounded Grayskull and looked back to the Sorceress. Her eyes filled with a sadness that only he could understand. He alone knew what the Sorceress had sacrificed, a secret that he would take to his grave. She had given up everything to keep this lonely vigil at the edge of the world. The Sorceress stepped back into the castle, a stony silhouette in its gateway. She turned toward Duncan and he could feel her eyes on him as the massive gate slowly worked its way closed. Skeletor was wrong. Duncan knew she was not infallible. Randor and others saw her only as she appeared, a powerful creature of magic, but Duncan saw her as she truly was: a once-human woman enduring the heaviest of burdens.

He knew her loneliness and wondered how she could stand it. He often wondered the same about himself. He lost sight of her as the drawbridge rumbled shut with a sickening finality, separating them for what Duncan feared would be the last time. The Eternian Man-At-Arms, considered by all to be the bravest in the realm, blinked back tears as he turned away to join his king. This was a dark day for Eternia, indeed a dark day in the history of Tellus itself.

1.

-NOW-

THE DISCOVERY

Throughout his lifetime, Randor, former king of Eternia, had fought against many enemies that threatened either his kingdom, his family, or his own life. However, today's enemy resided purely within himself. Taking a moment to gaze at his homeland through the picturesque window within his quarters, Randor found himself battling tooth and nail against hope. He was glad to be alone as the haste in which he dressed was unbecoming of someone of his stature, especially since he was merely answering the call of the Eternian librarian. Her messenger had just left and he wanted to get to the library of Eternos Palace as soon as possible.

Randor walked to the entrance of his quarters before opening the large door and striding briskly out into the hallway. Though he would usually spend a piece of his morning looking out over the kingdom and admiring it, especially this close to the Winter Solstice, which was a particularly beautiful time of year in this region, today he only had time to give it a cursory glance. If the story he'd just been told were true, an item had recently come into the library's possession that made his heart beat a bit too fast for his comfort. He was embarrassed to feel this way. Too

many times had this happened. Too many times had hope filled him, only to lead to bitter disappointment. What made this time different? He did not know the answer, but he could feel that it was, somehow.

Shadows from torches danced playfully on white marble steps as Randor made his way up the windowless stairwell to the library of Eternos Palace. A love for books and the knowledge contained within them had been instilled in Randor at a young age. His late father had held the library in high regard as a place of both rest and learning. King Miro had raised Randor to be a thoughtful and intelligent man. He had been taught to always rule his people with his mind first and foremost, rather than letting his heart guide his every action, as some king's had, only to bring ruin to their kingdoms through poor judgment and often poorer character. Miro also taught his son the importance of history and the power of knowing its truths.

Due to this love of history, King Miro had made it a habit to record his own adventures throughout his life. Having read them several times over from the time he was a young boy, Randor felt that he had more than just a broad picture of who his father had been before the old king's death had left him the Eternian throne many years before. Through his reading, Randor felt as though he'd been at his father's side for every journey; that he knew what had transpired throughout King Miro's life as if he had been there himself. Because of this, he felt as if he knew his father's heart more than anyone.

As he walked hurriedly up the long stairwell, the item Randor sought today turned his mind toward one decision that his father had made that he did not understand. That decision had been the banishment of his bastard son, Randor's older half-brother, just before Randor had been born. His name was Keldor and before Randor's birth he had lived seven happy years within the walls of this very palace. His mother was a Gar woman named Nira, her native blue skin passing on to her son, albeit in a lighter shade, a permanent reminder of his mixed heritage.

A renewed war between the Eternians and the Gar strained the Eternian public's opinion of Nira and Keldor. When Miro married Randor's mother, making her queen, things became even more complicated. With a queen on the throne, and a recognized heir on the way, the Eternian people had finally had enough of Miro's mistress and her son, and they forced Miro's hand, making him send them away in exile, a sad byproduct of their xenophobia toward the Gar. One of Randor's first acts as ruler of Eternia, so long ago, was to return his brother to his rightful place at the palace. Eventually that decision would cost him, but that didn't matter to him now. Randor was nearing his sixtieth birthday and his brother had now been missing for many years.

In that time, many things had changed. Randor had watched his own son grow into a man in Keldor's absence. Two years past, after a long illness, his wife, the Queen Marlana, had passed into the everdream, the form of afterlife that Eternians believed the soul entered after death. After her passing, the duties of

the crown had begun to weigh heavily on Randor's mind. On the last Winter Solstice, during the yearly festival that celebrated the end of the harvest and the beginning of the new year, Randor had given up his crown as a surprise part of the ceremony that capped the night's festivities. He bequeathed it to his son, Adam, who had recently taken the captain of the guard, Teela, as his bride. Randor was proud of the man his son had grown to become and knew he would be a fine king. He also knew that Eternia could have no better queen than Teela.

Teela was the daughter of Randor's lifelong friend, Duncan, the Eternian Man-At-Arms. Duncan had raised her as his own after adopting Teela as an infant. Both men took great pride in their children and knew that they would serve Eternia well. Randor had been given the throne suddenly upon King Miro's death and he often felt that he had been too young, with little experience in the affairs of the kingdom. Older than Randor had been at the time he'd taken on the crown, Adam, at twenty-seven years of age, was certainly a man in his own right. However, Randor knew that the duties of a king took a lifetime to learn and felt that he could be of more use to Adam as council in his remaining years, giving him the benefit of knowledge that Randor had so sorely needed during his own early time as king.

The most notable change since Keldor had disappeared was both the erection and eventual failure of the Mystic Wall. Constructed to keep the evil denizens of the Dark Hemisphere at bay, it had collapsed a decade ago, releasing Skeletor and a small army of warriors now under his command from their confinement. Luckily for Eternia, every so often throughout Tellus's history, a hero would emerge to fight the evil that pervades its lands. Randor knew its current defender well as the warrior called He-Man had spent the time since the collapse of the wall fighting by the Eternian people's sides to keep Tellus safe. As powerful as he was, however, He-Man had only managed to keep Skeletor and his minions at bay, never defeating them outright. As time went on, Randor had begun to wonder if their stalemate would last forever.

Upon reaching the crest of the stairwell, Randor made his way down a long hall. While he walked, Randor thought about his lost brother, the subject of his hasty answering of the librarian's call. For nearly thirty years he had sought to learn of his brother's fate, his only clue in all of that time coming from Skeletor, casting doubt upon its truth. According to Skeletor, he'd once held Keldor prisoner and had told Randor at the time that his brother was still alive, but no words spoken by that monster could be trusted. Regardless, Randor tried every year around this time to discover his brother's fate, and had met with failure upon each attempt.

Despite this, the thirst for knowledge of what had happened to his brother drove Randor. Though he feared magic and what it was capable of, having shunned it long ago due to its involvement in Keldor's disappearance, Randor had even tried sorcery in his desperation. His search for the truth trumped his fears. Each Winter Solstice, when magic was its strongest, he used an ancient book from the Eternian library to open a veil, praying to see what had happened to his brother. Even if it had happened years in the past, with nothing Randor could do to change

it, he felt that he had to know. Every year, like clockwork, the veil showed him only Skeletor, mocking Randor's attempts as the sorcerer blocked his weak spell. The Winter Solstice was fast approaching once more, merely a week away, but this year he'd need no magic to discover his brother's ultimate end. What he'd searched for all of these years, the truth, was here. Here, in this library. At least that is what he hoped, despite his desire to quell that particular emotion. Something had come to be here, in the librarian Coranah's possession, that changed everything and Randor found himself believing that it would answer his questions, at long last.

The man who was once king swung open a large wooden door and strode into the massive library. Thousands of books and scrolls lined its many shelves, which began low to the floor and reached nearly to the room's high mosaic ceiling. Randor's father Miro had been a collector of such treasures, taking pleasure especially from the historical records and biographies that made up a large portion of the collection. Miro had cherished each and every piece of work that the library held, though there were surely many that he had never read, or perhaps even held in his hands. Randor often wondered if someone could ever read them all, even if they were to dedicate their lives to it. He would always come to the same conclusion: they would barely scratch the surface.

Located within Eternos Palace, the library was one of its most impressive rooms by far, a unique mixture of ancient architecture and Tellus's latest technology. Once an armory, before King Miro had had it converted early in his reign, it still had rows of armor on display along with its collection of books and scrolls. On any other day, Randor would have walked slowly through the massive room, taking in every sight and smell, savoring the place. Today, he hurriedly rushed through it.

The main library, open to the public, consisted of one room, second in size only to the throne room itself. Rows of wooden shelves filled much of the available space, each a part of a unique shelving system designed by Duncan. Being mechanical in nature, the racks consisted of a series of shelves that moved vertically in rotation. To acquire a book from the top shelf, the simple push of a button would cause the rack to lower, moving the racks below it further down before moving behind the machine, and eventually rising, out of sight. Continuing to operate it would bring the lower racks to the top and begin the cycle once more. It was quite ingenious and not only saved room within the library, but also made the use of ladders unnecessary.

Seemingly empty at the moment, the large room was eerily quiet. As Randor called for the library's keeper, his voice felt small within it. "Coranah?"

After a moment, he heard her answer. "Yes, Sire, I am here." An elderly woman stepped out from behind a nearby rack of particularly ancient texts and approached him. He returned her informal bow with a smile. He had spent much time in the library, especially since giving Adam the crown, and she had become

a friend.

Tall for an Eternian woman, her once blonde hair, now gray, was tied in a long braid that hung down to the small of her back. Her face had lines, as Randor's now did, that showed her age. The most striking aspect of her appearance was her eyes, which held a learned knowledge that came from a lifetime of admiring and serving history and its records. There was a brightness to them that made them unique among Eternians, even those who lived within the palace walls, and Randor cherished the many talks the two of them had shared over warm drinks in her office.

The section she approached him from, dedicated to magic, had long been small, relegated to only a handful of works. Over the years, especially since the dawn of He-Man, Randor had lightened his stance on the subject, and the library's collection of magical works had grown a bit, although not considerably. Coranah, he'd noticed, had taken a bit of an interest in it recently. He attributed this to her own enthusiasm for ancient scrolls and texts, which he had to admit exceeded even his.

Knowing why he had come, she brought with her a thick book, its simple cover a stark contrast to the treasure that Randor hoped might lay within its pages.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire. This is the item we spoke of." She handed the book to him. He weighed it in his hands, feeling the texture of the leather cover under his fingers. He was surprised with the book's condition. As a student of history, Randor was used to handling ancient texts carefully, for fear that the brittle works would crumble within his grasp. This journal, though not nearly as old, was in surprisingly good shape, even in comparison to contemporary works. He gently flipped through it and was immediately taken not only by the Eternian royal seal on the first page, but by the intricately detailed script that followed, its penmanship immaculate as it spelled out the title: "The Chronicles of Keldor, True King of Eternia." Randor raised his brow. He looked at Coranah, who raised hers as well. "Bold," he said.

"Treasonous," she replied.

It would require a close examination later, but it also seemed as if the last chapter were written sometime after the previous entries, perhaps even decades later. "This is quite amazing." Randor felt his heartbeat increasing once again.

"Yes, Sire, I thought so as well." She smiled, happy to see that the former king she was lucky enough to call her friend might finally have what he'd sought for so long.

"Let's go to your office, Coranah. I'd like for you to tell me once again how you came by this. The messenger told me bits and pieces, but I want to hear it in

your own words.”

“Of course, Sire.” Coranah turned and the two of them began walking toward a small room in the far left corner of the library. Other than his father’s personal study, which was located on the opposite corner, her office was the only locked room within the library. As they entered, he took a seat in a large chair, his favorite in the room. She sat across from him, behind her desk, and began to tell her story. “A man brought this to me late last night. He was a local farmer and had been tilling his field when beasts from the Dark Hemisphere attacked him. Its border runs dangerously near his farmland. He says that he ran in the only direction he could, into the barren wastes that spread across the edge of the Dark Hemisphere itself. The story, as he told it to me, was that he’d taken refuge in a cave, its opening large enough for him to crawl through, but too small for the beasts to follow. Inside the cave, lit by phosphorescent glow, he made a discovery. This book.”

“Did he know what it was? That it related to Keldor?” Randor leaned forward, keenly interested.

“I do not know that he made the connection to your lost brother. As I understand it, he did not know how to read it, but he had recognized the Eternian royal seal upon its first page. Thinking it may be worth something to you, he had taken it with him back to his home once he was safe, and then further, to me.” She sat forward as well, excited to be telling this part of the story, as it was her own.

“At first,” she continued, “I had thought it to be a mere lost journal, worthless to anyone but its writer, as it did not appear to be very old. Despite this, I paid the man well for his efforts. The book had certainly been found under unusual circumstances. How had it come to be in that cave? Upon opening the cover, a gasp escaped my throat as I laid eyes on its title. Shocking, to say the least! I spent some time last night trying to ascertain its authenticity, and I feel it is genuine. As soon as morning came, I sent word to you to let you know of its discovery.”

“Thank you for that.” Randor’s search for his brother Keldor’s fate was public knowledge, and there was a standing reward for anything regarding the former Lord of Eternia. It was not often that anything real or truthful was found and there had even been a few forgeries over the years, which lead to moments of excitement before they ultimately gave themselves away with inaccurate history. Randor could spot these fakes quickly, being quite aware of Keldor’s history in the palace, both as a youth, from reading his father’s journals, and from the time Randor spent with Keldor after they had grown. He remembered his brother well, and false accounts of his journey were easy to recognize, as they were often out of character.

This journal, however, seemed unique in its apparent authenticity, just as Coranah had attested. It was large and leather bound, the writing inside intricate and set to parchment with the careful stoke of an old-fashioned quill pen. It did not

appear similar to any of the past forgeries, which were usually written in haste, another sure giveaway. Also, the “True King of Eternia” part of the title made it as intriguing to Randor as it had been to his librarian friend. If it were a forgery, it wouldn’t have such a title. It was treasonous and not the type of book you would deliberately bring to anyone of the royal court’s attention if you were simply looking for a reward. Those looking for monetary gains would much more likely make their forgery as flattering as possible. More than that, Randor knew that it was exactly the kind of title Keldor would have wanted it to have.

While he continued to study the book in his grasp, he realized that after years of searching, he now finally had something concrete. This did not seem to be a forgery. It seemed very real. It could truly be, at long last, an account of what had happened to his lost brother. Could it possibly be true? Could this be the moment he’d longed for over so many years? He looked at Coranah and spoke, his voice cracking slightly in a struggle to maintain his composure. “The room to my father’s study. You have the only other key.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Give it to me, please.”

Upon his request, the librarian pulled a ring of keys from her belt, shuffling through them until she found the one he’d asked for. Removing it from the ring, she handed it to him as he stood. “Here it is, Sire.”

“Thank you, Coranah. I am going there now, with this book. Please,” he paused, “see that I’m not disturbed.”

“Of course, your majesty.” She smiled radiantly, proud of her find.

Holding the book under his left arm, he raised his right hand to her shoulder and squeezed it affectionately. “Thank you for this, Coranah.” He turned and left her office, heading for his father’s study. This particular room was precious to him because it contained the entirety of his father’s own works and had acted as his personal study before his death. It was also a place of refuge in which Randor could think and read in peace, away from the duties of the kingdom, where despite no longer being king, his presence was still often required. He placed the book down gently on the room’s only table before going back to the door and quietly locking himself inside. He knew that locking himself in was probably unnecessary, but he did not want any distractions.

Randor reached down into the front of his tunic and pulled out a thin chain that hung around his neck. On it were three keys, each belonging to three of the four most secure rooms in the palace: the war room, his personal quarters, and this study. The fourth room, for which he no longer carried a key, was the master bedroom suite, which now belonged to his son and his wife, the current king and queen of Eternia. Undoing a small clasp in the chain, he added Coranah’s copy

of his father's study key to the chain and dropped it back within his tunic. Returning to the table, Randor looked at the object that could very well be what he has searched for for so long. He sat in the table's accompanying chair, high backed and ornate.

Randor surmised that it must have been the dry and temperate environment of the cave that had kept the leather bound work in its pristine condition. He leaned forward and sniffed it gently, wanting to examine it in every way possible. It smelled faintly of dust, with no traces of mildew or mold. Just dust and nothing more. In many ways, his memories of Keldor had become dust themselves, the bad times eroding into the distant past while the times of joy remained fresh in his mind, as if they had happened yesterday. Perhaps this colored his perception, perhaps not. He tried to remember the good, and often pushed away the bad. In a life of both triumph and tragedy, he found it more productive to focus on the positive moments.

However, he found that it was becoming harder and harder to focus on the good memories, as he once had, for with every year added to his life, he had more and more regrets. The loss of his father. Many rash decisions he had made in his youth as king, before he'd reminded himself of Miro's lessons. The betrayal of his brother. The loss of his daughter Adora, Adam's twin sister. And now, most recently, the death of his beloved wife, Marlana. Even with the more recent pain of his wife's death, it was the loss of his precious Adora and the introduction of Skeletor that stung the most. Those incidents in his past, forever linked, had been the catalysts for this entire endeavor, had they not? His search for Keldor? The evil sorcerer Skeletor had been with his master Hordak, a terrifying alien warlord, during the fateful attack on Eternos Palace that had cost Randor his daughter, so long ago. Of all of Randor's memories, both fond and bitter, his memory of that day was still painfully fresh.

Skeletor had once claimed Randor's brother had been a prisoner at Snake Mountain, the vile place that the sorcerer called home. Finding out what had happened to his brother could possibly give Randor some insight as to where Skeletor had come from, or where his daughter may now be. Randor knew that reading this journal was going to be an undertaking, especially emotionally. As much as he felt he was ready, he knew that he needed time to reflect first. He had to bring himself back to that horrible day, the day Skeletor had first come into his life and helped steal his beloved daughter away from him.

It had been so many years ago now since he had turned his back on Grayskull, Randor thought. Despite his anger with the Sorceress at the time, he could not help but admit that Eternia had had years of peace due to the Mystic Wall that she had erected. He had felt safe. What Randor did not understand in those days was that the relationship between Grayskull and Eternia had become symbiotic over the years. Without his support, its power had been weakened. With her attention divided due to having to protect Grayskull herself, the Sorceress had also been weakened. That combination had unfortunately made the Mystic Wall

weak, as well.

The wall held true for seventeen years of peace, but the day came when it fell. Skeletor had not stopped trying to breach its barrier. He was not one to give up easily. Again and again as the years passed, he had attempted to bring it down, his repeated failures driving him even madder in the process. It had been the Havok Staff, Randor had learned, that had been the tipping point. Skeletor had liberated it from the armory of a being known only as The Faceless One, who had been tasked to keep it out of the hands of evil. Obviously, he had failed.

The Zalesian ram-headed staff had been the key. It had increased Skeletor's already great power tenfold and gave him the means to at last destroy the barrier keeping him from Grayskull and Eternia. His troops, men and creatures he'd gathered over time, along with his protégé, Evil-Lyn, marched on Eternos palace after the wall fell. The palace had been overrun. Randor's son Adam, along with his good friend, Duncan, had gone missing. It had been the darkest day since the loss of Princess Adora.

It turned out, however, that although Randor had turned his back on Grayskull and the Sorceress, she had not done the same to him. The thought of it brought a smile to the aging man's face as he sat in his father's study. No, she had forgiven him, despite his error in judgment. She had furnished him, no, she had provided all of Eternia with a protector. A warrior. She had given them He-Man.

A brave man, both gentle and mighty. Both unstoppable and yet completely trustworthy. Both protector and friend. He-Man was tall and broad, with incredible power bestowed upon him by the Sorceress and Castle Grayskull. If He-Man's strength and sense of honor was a product of the secrets of Grayskull, then surely Randor had been a fool to forsake it. The warrior had shoulder-length blonde hair and carried many of the qualities that Randor saw in his own son, Adam, although the boy himself did not.

Duncan's daughter Teela had also grown into a strong and independent young woman and Randor had named her Captain of the Guard on her twentieth birthday. It was a task she took on with honor and grace and he often wished that her patience and skill in battle had rubbed off on his own son a little more in his youth. She, along with her father, had become two of He-Man's greatest allies in his constant battles against Skeletor. Their personal war had raged for years now and Randor feared that it was at a stalemate.

He-Man wielded the Sword of Light, bequeathed to him by the Sorceress and infused with the mighty power of Castle Grayskull. Skeletor wielded the Sword of Darkness, once belonging to Randor's older brother, Keldor. The exact details of how Skeletor had acquired it were still a mystery. He-Man and Skeletor were evenly matched in many ways. He-Man won out when it came to tests of strength, but Skeletor's sorcery often rendered the point moot. He-Man did not kill and thus

drew the line at a point Randor did not agree with in regards to the evil warrior, but he respected He-Man's decision nonetheless. Contrarily, Skeletor had no lines to cross, no scruples to uphold, and no conscience to concern him. He would do anything to win. It was all He-Man and his fellow warriors could do just to keep Skeletor at bay, much less defeat him entirely.

Setting his eyes once again on the mysterious book before him, Randor realized that, as with Keldor's fate, this discovery might also hold the secrets of Skeletor's origins. He could only hope that its scribe had gotten to the end of the story. To his brother's end. No matter how painful it may be for Randor to read of it, he knew Skeletor was involved with Keldor's disappearance. His ownership of the Sword of Darkness proved this. Randor could wait no longer. He'd thought back to his most painful days. The loss of Adora. The emergence of Skeletor. His betrayal of Grayskull. He was as prepared as he could be. Surely, nothing contained in this book could be direr than those days. At long last, he was finally going to learn the fate of his brother, for better or worse. As much as Randor tried to remember his brother in a positive light, he had to admit that Keldor was not a good man, at least not after the Great Unrest and the twisting of Count Marzo's spell books. It may be difficult to read of those days once more, but it was necessary.

Is this how you felt, brother? He thought. Are these the emotions you had as you stared at Marzo's books for the first time? The hunger for knowledge, knowing inside that that very knowledge could be damning? He opened the leather bound journal gently, flipped past the title and Eternian Royal Seal on its early pages, and began to read the first entry.

2.

BETRAYAL

I do not know who will read this, if anyone, but it is a tale that must be told. I've always been fond of stories, whether told to me at a young age by my father, or, as I grew older, concocted by me in an effort to get something that I wanted. Stories hold power, especially those that are true, and I can tell you that these stories are indeed true. How do I know this? Although some were told to me and I committed them to paper here as best as my memory would allow, I know the truths of the others because I was there. I lived them. These are the tales of Keldor of the House of Miro, true and rightful king of Eternia, and it has fallen upon me to record them.

A usurper sits upon his throne. This man is his younger brother, Randor. While for a time there was a peace between them, it was inevitable that Keldor would one day claim what was rightfully his. King Randor is a strong man. Strong in his convictions and in his unfair treatment of his older brother. It was an unjust twist of fate that caused Keldor to be born half Gar, a race

with whom the Eternians had long been at odds, even to the point of war. His light blue skin gave away his mixed heritage and was the cause of his first exile as the weak Eternian people feared him and his mother, forcing King Miro's hand, or so the man would tell his younger son when pressed years later.

When Randor learned of his brother's continued existence, he should have acknowledged Keldor as king, but instead he kept a death grip on his father's throne and insulted the rightful king with the title of "Lord." Keldor had spent his life in the wilderness and surrounding villages of his own homeland, forbidden to return after he had been exiled by his own father. He had raised himself into a man and a warrior with no help from his family. Keldor was not only the firstborn, but a man who had earned his right to be king through his ordeals. The death of his mother. Slavery, war, dark sorcery: the battles and triumphs that Keldor could claim would make him fit to be king, even if he were second born. He is more of a man than Randor, and he is more fit to be king than Randor.

I was not there to witness this first tale, but I will do my best to present it as Keldor himself told it to me. It was a day in late spring, during a time of peace in Randor's kingdom that the king called for his brother to join him and fate dealt Keldor yet another cruel hand.

■ ■ ■

It was late in the afternoon and Lord Keldor was alone in his chambers studying the ancient books of magic in his possession, as he often was. Long red curtains would have plunged the room into darkness if not for the multitude of candles that caused shadows to move rhythmically along the walls as their flames flickered. Keldor preferred the ambience of candlelight while he read to the distractions of his room's large windows and the world outside that they shared. An ornate bed was once the centerpiece of the room, but Keldor had long ago moved it to the left-most wall, giving the intricately carved desk on which he studied more of a presence. The first thing a visitor would see, though they were few, would be his desk and the bookshelves that lined the wall opposite the bed.

Keldor pulled his black cloak tighter to him in the unusually cold room, kept that way to protect his collection of ancient books from deteriorating. He leaned forward in interest as he calmly turned the pages of one of his favorites. It was dedicated to one of the many facets of alchemy, the science of transmutation. The Eternian Lord was fascinated with the idea that you could take one thing, or a mixture of things, and turn them into something altogether different. Underneath his cloak, he wore his usual royal attire: a sleeveless purple tunic and forearm bracers along with black trousers and tall black leather boots. He read to the end of a page and turned back, looking for something he must have missed. He was a bit pre-occupied this day, and found himself skimming more than he was reading. Just as he found what he was looking for, he heard a rapping at his door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Corporal Scope, my Lord," came the answer, the voice speaking in hushed tones.

Keldor smiled. Trydor Esoonix Scope was a member of the Royal Guard who had been one of the few Eternians to have befriended Keldor. Friendship, or a relationship of any kind, for that matter, was not something that Keldor entered into lightly. Scope was an intelligent man, however, rivaling the Eternian Man-At-Arms Duncan in his mechanical know-how and ingenuity, although he kept this knowledge mostly to himself. He was a quiet man, as Keldor was, and he found that they had much in common. Most importantly, Scope was loyal to Keldor, more to him than anyone in the kingdom, including the king himself. Keldor had learned long ago that, although one should always be wary of others, it was good to have allies, and Corporal Scope was his closest since returning to Eternos Palace some years before. Keldor stood and gently closed his book. He walked quietly to his chamber's lone door and unlocked it, opening it only slightly, the light from the hallway so bright in comparison to his room that he had to wait a moment for his eyes to adjust. "I've been expecting you, Trydor. Did anyone see you?"

"No, my Lord." Corporal Scope was slightly shorter than Keldor, and looked like any other Royal Guard in his uniform. Keldor knew, however, that Scope was lean and muscled, and a fine swordsman. Keldor used to spar with his brother Randor often, but of late, Corporal Scope had been his more frequent opponent. Scope's entire face seemed carved from granite, made up of hard lines and angles. His eyes were bright, lively, and aware, which was more than Keldor could say about most Eternians.

Keldor opened the door further and beckoned his friend inside. When he closed the door behind them, the room was once again largely swallowed by the darkness. "What news from outside the walls?"

"Nothing, Sir. I don't have a report for you."

Keldor gave his friend a curious look. "Then why are you here?"

Even in the dim light of the candles, he could see that Corporal Scope looked nervous. "The king sent me to find you and tell you that he wishes to see you."

"He sent you, personally?" Keldor asked.

"Yes."

The Eternian Lord hissed slightly under his breath. "And there is no word from outside of Eternia?"

"No, Sir."

"Do you not think it odd that he sent you, and not one of your subordinates?" Keldor rubbed his long goatee in thought.

"I do. Do you think he suspects something?" Corporal Scope asked.

"It's entirely possible, although there is nothing to worry about yet. Things may still unfold as planned." He looked his friend in the eye and clapped him on the left shoulder. "I do think, however, that if my brother suspects you of colluding with me that it would be wise for you to leave this place."

"Where would I go?" Scope asked, sounding concerned.

"I have an ally in the outlying lands named Kronis who can help you. Seek him out and tell him I sent you. I'm sure he can find work for you."

"Yes, my Lord. Are you sure you do not need my services here?"

Keldor shook his head. "Things are in motion, my friend. I have no worries."

Scope nodded and shook Keldor's hand. "Then I'll do as you ask and look for this Kronis."

Keldor smiled slightly. "Do not worry, Trydor, we shall meet again, and when we do, you shall be my Man-At-Arms."

"I would be honored, sir." They broke their grip and Corporal Scope turned to leave.

"Trydor, do not forget-" Keldor paused as his friend looked back. "Make sure you don't owe Kronis any money or he won't care whether or not you are my friend."

"Understood, sir. Good luck."

“I don’t need luck, my friend. I have destiny on my side.” The two men nodded to each other and Corporal Scope opened the door once more, looking cautiously in both directions before leaving both the room and Eternia behind.

Keldor removed his cloak and laid it on the room’s lone useable chair as the other was covered with books that his shelves could no longer hold. Afterward, he exited the room, locking it behind him. As he made his way to the throne room, he smiled to himself, as victory was within his grasp. The fact that there was no word from outside the walls didn’t matter. It was all a part of his plan. Finally, after years of placating his brother, he was ready to take back what was rightfully his.

Keldor entered the great hall and took it in, looking forward to the time when it would belong to him. The largest room in the palace, it could have fit a family of giants inside of it comfortably. Royal blue curtains draped the impressive windows that lined the walls. The light that spilled in through them caused the white marble floor to gleam brightly, making it look almost otherworldly. Massive white pillars were spaced evenly throughout the room, holding up the colorful mosaic ceiling. His father, King Miro, had been quite fond of mosaic ceilings. Looking around the empty room, he thought for a moment that he had been deceived until he saw King Randor sitting quietly upon his throne, a member of the Royal Guard on either side of him.

Randor turned to the guards. “Leave us.”

“Yes, your majesty,” they said in unison. As they walked passed Keldor, he gave neither of them more than a glance. Only when they had left the room, closing the door behind them, did Randor speak again.

The king called to him, his voice echoing in the great hall. “I wish to have words with you, brother.”

Keldor recognized this meeting for what it was and readied himself for what was coming. If all went according to his plan, this confrontation would end with him as king. The half-brothers’ relationship had soured over the years and Keldor had expected this moment to come for some time of its own accord. Tired of waiting for Randor to make the first move, the half-Gar lord had finally orchestrated it himself. It was hard to believe that the moment he’d been waiting for was finally here, happening right now, but he was prepared. “What words would those be, Randor? I am curious as to why I was called here,” he said calmly as he approached the throne. “I requested to be left to my studies in peace, as you are well aware. I’m not used to answering your every beck and call.”

Randor rose from his throne and walked slowly down the dozen steps that led to it, putting himself at the same level as his older brother. “I’ll just get straight to it, then. I have received word that a small army has been assembling in the far hills, presumably to attack us here at Eternos Palace.”

Keldor was still and gave away nothing with his passive expression. "What has this to do with me? Surely no army is a match for yours, as Marzo proved. Can Duncan and his men not handle them himself, or do you require my swordplay to save him once again?"

"They are your soldiers, Keldor. Mercenaries, I'm told, loyal to you, or at least your coin. They have been vanquished," Randor answered.

Keldor shook his head. "You are mistaken, dear sibling. What reason would I have for attacking this kingdom? It is my home, is it not?"

"Because, 'dear' brother," Randor nearly spat the words, "I am aware of your lust for more power, and for my throne as well. Those infernal books have twisted you into something sinister over the years. You were planning a coup, were you not? I see that lust in your eyes grow every day. While I have done my best to ignore it out of a loyalty to the blood we share, do not think me a fool." Randor's eyes looked angry, but behind that anger they held a sadness. "I had thought that the Great Unrest had been put to an end with Count Marzo's defeat, but now even you have betrayed me."

Keldor's hand unconsciously brushed against the hilt of his sword, an exquisite piece constructed of black steel and silver. He pondered what to say next before nodding in affirmation, admitting the truth. "Yes, brother, the soldiers were mine, and you were right about the coup, but you are wrong about two things." Keldor began to slowly draw his sword, but stopped short of fully unsheathing it. "The first is that I've been twisted by nothing. I've always felt cheated by this pathetic arrangement of being your lackey. I've patiently waited for the day when I could stop acting as if it suited me." He paced slowly, gauging his brother's reaction, who stood motionless. "The second is that the soldiers were never meant to attack this palace. They were merely a distraction. A costly one, to be sure, but one that has served its purpose." He smiled slightly, giving him a look that could pass for both charming and sinister. "I've learned much in my time here, Randor, and if the war with Marzo proved anything, it's your army's worth. Now, however, they are no longer here to defend you. You were unwise to meet me alone, and that shall be your one final failure!" As he shouted his final word, Keldor drew his sword and attacked, but it was quickly met and blocked by Randor's own weapon, drawn in an instant.

The chamber echoed with the clamor of steel clashing against steel. The fight was personal, blood versus blood, and the battle was furious. Randor was on the receiving end of a flurry of attacks from Keldor's sword, keeping the king constantly on defense. After a successful block on Randor's part, the king parried the follow up blow and backed away from his opponent. "Why, Keldor? I love you, brother. The Queen loves you like a brother. I refuse to believe that you are in your right mind. Why would you betray us? Our trust?"

Keldor eyed his half-brother as he paced, ready to attack at any moment.

The answer to that particular question had been sitting on his tongue for years. He was happy to finally release it from its captivity. "Oh, dear brother, how little you truly know me. You speak of love? This is what you would use to attempt to sway me? Love?" He scoffed. "Our father had many loves, Randor. Food. Wine. The hunt. Oh, and women. No Eternian could forget that. But he didn't love me, did he?"

Keldor's foot suddenly struck his opponent in the stomach, the vicious power of the blow knocking the air from Randor's lungs and dropping him to his knees. Keldor's blue skin glistened with sweat and his eyes narrowed as he brought the tip of his sword to the king's throat. "Love is a lie. If it were real, then my father would not have forsaken me. I am the eldest of his sons and rightful heir, not you. Everything that is yours that I lust after rightfully belongs to me. Have you never pondered it? What it would be like if the bastard had wed my mother instead of yours? Surely the thought has crossed your mind, as it has my own."

Randor swallowed, the tip of Keldor's sword drawing a trickle of blood from his exposed neck as he did so. "I have considered it, brother," he rasped. "But fate deals its hand as it pleases, Keldor. If I could go back, change things, I still would not. The throne would suit you ill. But you cannot blame our father for that. Despite what you feel, despite what others thought about the king having two women, he love-

"One of which he cast out! Along with his own son!" Keldor raised his sword for the killing blow, but Randor swiftly rolled out of the way of the descending blade and sprang back up, his own weapon at the ready once more.

"We were at war with the Gar, Keldor! Your mother's race, whose blood you share! The people thought she was a witch! They were rising against him and would have had him strung up at the gallows if he'd kept you within the palace walls!" the king yelled, trying to reason with his older brother.

Keldor growled in anger. "He could have used us to unite the races, Randor! A fitting example that the Eternians and the Gar could exist together in peace, but instead he bowed to the will of his weak-minded people and cast us aside like refuse. He was a coward!" Keldor struck, the fight again in full swing. His face contorted into a grimace of pain as he recalled his past in the midst of their battle. "Even the Gar warriors would not accept us after our exile, due to my Eternian heritage. To them, I was an impure half-breed. We were welcome nowhere and had to live like animals!" The strength of his blows increased with his anger, but he was sacrificing finesse for power. "After years of wandering, I was forced to watch helplessly as my mother was eaten by beasts in the wild, her once great power sapped by hunger and sickness. Afterward, when it was already too late, I stabbed and killed those same beasts and ate them in turn." Slashing to the left, Keldor's sword sliced into his brother's right arm, barely stopped by the chain mail armor underneath his robes, but the close save of the armor did not keep the king

from crying out in pain as it hit. "My mother should have been queen, but instead she was slaughtered like an animal," Keldor snarled. "I was a child, Randor! Of noble blood! Yet I had to live as those very beasts did, fearing Eternian and Gar alike."

Randor parried and tried to gain some distance, his arm screaming in pain. "I've never claimed that Miro was a noble man, Keldor, but he was our father. When he died and I became king, so many years ago, my first order of business was to bring you back." He struck back. "Never having met you, I accepted you as my true brother and made you a lord, despite your origins, and our father's mistakes. But I see that spite and anger have poisoned your heart, along with jealousy. I wish it were not so." He struck again and again, but Keldor blocked his every blow.

The blue-skinned lord smiled. "Yes, brother, you made me a lord, insulting me and embarrassing me to no end. You know I should have been made king, and now, fate, as you say, Randor, has dealt its hand." As their battle continued, the fight went back to Keldor's favor, with King Randor on the defensive. The tide soon turned, however, as Keldor's pride, his weakness, got the better of him.

Keldor taunted the king as if he were nothing more to him than any other enemy. "What ails you, brother? You fight like a young stable boy! If only our father had been more discerning of his whores, maybe that is what you would have been, instead of king!" His smile broadened. "It all comes down to this: I should have been king. And with your death, king I shall be!" Keldor's boot knocked Randor to the ground and he raised his sword for the final blow. "And now, you di-AHHHHH!!!" Keldor screamed in pain as his brother's sword deeply cut into the flesh of his left thigh.

"You should not gloat, Keldor, it does not become you, and it leaves you open to attack." The king grimaced. "And guard your words when you speak of my mother!" Randor kicked Keldor in the gut and rose from the ground, regaining his breath as well as his composure. Keldor writhed in pain on the stone floor, holding his thigh in an attempt to stop the blood from flowing. Randor grimaced as he no longer had any choice. There was no saving Keldor from himself, it would seem. "Guards!"

Several of the king's guards rushed into the room, seeing the sight for the first time, ashamed that they had thought the battle to be another one of the brother's sparring matches, which were not uncommon in happier times. One of them spoke. "By the Sorceress! Your Majesty, what has happened!?"

Randor gasped as he caught his breath. "I have stopped my brother from making a terrible mistake. He has enough to pay for as it is. Take Keldor to the dungeon and tend to his wound." The King looked upon his brother, now held tightly by two of the guards. In the weakened state brought on by his loss of blood, Keldor was no match for them and fought little. As the King took a deep breath to

collect himself, he saw his brother's blood seep into the same stone floor where Randor had often played as a child. In that moment, he realized for the first time that perhaps Keldor once had as well. He sighed quietly to himself and spoke to the guards, not looking up, "I banish Keldor, as my father did before me. Perhaps he had the right idea." He paused before adding, "He will be taken to Castle Grayskull. The Sorceress will decide his final fate."

■ ■ ■

A day passed, but Keldor had lost any real sense of time. It was dark in the dungeon of Eternos Palace and he did not know that night had come and gone. The cold stone walls were wet with moisture and the air was cold. There was no window in his cell, the only features in the room a cot and a hole in the floor for refuse. It was morning when two of the palace's guards came and opened his cell, the seldom-used metal door squeaking on its hinges. The guard on the left spoke. "You must come with us, Keldor. The King wishes to see you before your trip to Grayskull and your meeting with the Sorceress."

Keldor said nothing, but followed the men as they marched him out of the cold dungeon. His hands were bound in chains behind his back, and the cold of the metal chilled him. He was still wearing his royal attire. His purple tunic was dirty and wet and the left leg of his black trousers was ripped and covered with dry blood. His wound had a cloth wrapped around it, tightly tied to prevent bleeding. He limped badly as they walked.

They led him out of the dungeon to the outside gates of the city where the king was waiting with his comrade, Duncan. Randor greeted his brother with sadness, but with strength and pride, as well. When he spoke, it was the voice of a man who had been contemplating what to say for an entire sleepless night.

"Keldor, I am a merciful man, as you know, but perhaps a bit too proud, a trait of our father's that I have inherited." The king looked down at the ground, but his eyes soon returned to those of his brother. "I do not wish for this to go any further than it already has. I forgive you your transgression. Please, Keldor, repent of your actions and join me again as a lord of Eternia and as my brother." Keldor's silence troubled Randor and he was unsure of what to do. "Please, Keldor," he repeated.

Keldor's eyes narrowed as he glared at his brother. "I am also a proud man, Randor, but I lack your sense of mercy." Keldor's face contorted into one of pure loathing and he spat at the king, the saliva hitting Randor in the face. "Save your pity for the weak."

The king would take no more, even from Keldor. He wiped his face and regarded the man opposite him silently for a moment. He was a mess. Keldor's royal tunic and clothes were dirty and wet from the dungeon. The wound on his leg should be no severe problem after it had healed, but now, having bled through the bandage and staining the leg of his trousers, it looked awful. His long black hair, so often pulled back, was loose and hanging in his face.

Despite Keldor's words, Randor couldn't help but pity the man; especially after all he'd been through during his first exile. It broke his heart to send Keldor back to the wilderness, but he saw no other choice. He couldn't bring himself to kill his own flesh and blood, even after what Keldor had done.

Keldor looked back at his brother, a cold look in his eyes. "You think of this as over, Randor, but I swear to you: I will not stop. I will have my rightful place as king. If I have to kill you, or Marlana, or even some day your children, I will wipe your bloodline from the face of Tellus and take what is mine."

Randor seethed. "So be it, then. Take him to the Sorceress, but do not bring him back. He is banished from this kingdom and shall never set foot in it again lest he forfeit his life. Go."

The massive gate to the kingdom of Eternia opened up before them. It was nearly forty feet high and constructed of strong oak and steel. Merely watching it swing down on its pulleys and levers was a sight to behold. When it had settled to the ground, the two guards shoved Keldor toward the outside of the castle. With each guard holding one of his arms, they led him through the gate to two servants waiting with three horses. They commanded Keldor to mount the steed and he did, for even with his pride he could not walk to Grayskull wounded as he was.

Randor closed his eyes painfully. Had Keldor been twisted by the books of magic in his possession, or had Randor truly been a blind fool all of these years? Did it even matter? Keldor was a threat to his kingdom and would have to be treated as any other. He opened his eyes as the guards tied Keldor to the horse before mounting their own, one on either side of him. The guard on the right took Keldor's horse's reins and, riding closely, they began to make their way to Castle Grayskull, the center of the universe's power, where the Sorceress would be waiting for them. It was there that Keldor would be dealt his final fate, and Randor was sure, even with the mercy and kindness of the Sorceress, that it would be a harsh one.

■ ■ ■

Keldor and the guards rode slowly, with nearly an hour passing before

Castle Grayskull loomed before them. The structure had been assembled shortly after the dawn of Eternia itself and it looked it. The walls were crumbling and the stones were chipped, some parts had even been burned black, all from previous attempts to invade the castle and control the power within it. Despite its rugged and decrepit appearance, the castle still held strong, due mostly to a centuries old spell that protected it from decay and unwelcome visitors. Only those the Sorceress allowed were granted access. No one would enter on this day. As the three men approached the castle, the Sorceress exited to join them, the massive stone gate closing behind her.

Keldor seemed to feel as if the castle itself, sculpted and chiseled into a massive stone skull above the gate, were staring down at him in disdain, a reflection of his own mortality, death waiting to take him into its arms. The Sorceress approached and spoke in a soft voice, "Please, good soldiers, heed my words and obey them. Untie your prisoner from his steed. Ride until you can hear us no longer and rest there. I will tell you when to return by giving you a sign."

The guards did as she commanded and began riding away. Only when they were out of earshot did the Sorceress speak to Keldor, who was still sitting upon his own horse.

"I greet you, Keldor. Please, join me here on the ground so that we may speak face to face." Keldor, with some struggle due to his wound and his bound wrists, dismounted and stood before her. Her beauty was stunning and this close, he could feel the power that emanated from her being. She seemed younger than he would have thought and this surprised him. There were rumors that the Sorceress of Grayskull was immortal, but it was also said that it was merely a role that was passed from being to being as generations passed. Keldor was not sure of the truth, but if it were the latter, he had to assume that this woman had not been Sorceress for very long. She eyed his leg and the wound there. The cloth that held it had become loose and his thigh had resumed bleeding. "Does it hurt, Keldor? Your wound?"

"Not any more than failure, Sorceress." Keldor, strong as he was, found it difficult to look the Sorceress in the eye, for even with his pride, the power she wielded humbled him.

"Then it shall be no more." The Sorceress raised her staff, called the staff of Zoar, which began to glow with a brilliant light as she pointed it at his wound. It quickly healed and disappeared. Keldor managed to find the strength to look up at her. She was quite the beautiful and exotic woman, appearing to be no older than him. Her hair was worn long and fell to the small of her back. It was as silver as the lining on his tunic had once been and upon it sat a feathered headdress that, although it wielded no power of its own, was beautiful unto itself. She wore a white gown with a silver breastplate covering her chest.

Seeing that his wound had healed, the Sorceress proceeded to use her

magic to remove the chains from his wrists, allowing him movement. Any thoughts of escape he may have had were soon gone as she enclosed him in a field of powerful energy that no mortal could dissolve, even one like himself, who had some knowledge of sorcery. "You have much to answer for, Keldor, but I shall not ask you to. You have always been a proud yet wanting man. I do not need to ask you why you have done this deed to know your reasoning."

"I only ask for that which is rightfully mine. It's not so hard to understand." Keldor stood strong and steadfast. "What will my fate be then, Sorceress? Get on with it, for I quickly grow tired of this prison you have encased me in."

The Sorceress sighed ever so slightly and looked Keldor in the eyes. "If you wish to know your fate so soon, I will give it to you."

Keldor paced within his small confines, no longer humbled, but angry. "Then speak, woman, and be done with it."

She nodded sadly. "So be it. I curse you, Keldor. You wished your brother a corpse, so shall you be a corpse, but one that lives. You will never truly die, as mortal men do, but rather live throughout eternity alone. It may seem a gift at first, but as all you know and love withers and dies, you will begin to feel differently." With the curse spoken she aimed her staff at Keldor. It glowed brightly before showering him in a green haze, which faded moments later. Keldor's blue skin grayed to a sickly pallor, becoming cold to the touch. His body was wracked with pain as he fell to the ground.

As she reentered Grayskull, Keldor screamed and cursed at the Sorceress before succumbing to the pain. He lay still, his eyes closed, his body dead, but with his soul unable to escape its cold prison. After an unknown amount of time, he awoke in a shocked gasp. He slowly rose from the ground and found himself free of the Sorceress's field of energy. His skin remained cold to the touch, even to his own hands. He shivered and cried to himself quietly. When he noticed the guards had returned, he quickly regained his composure. The Sorceress must have called them during his bizarre transformation.

The guards dismounted and looked upon him in fright, their jaws slack at the sight of what appeared to be a living corpse. After a moment one spoke to him. "Keldor the Cursed, you are to come with us. We take you out of the kingdom of Eternia, never to return."

"No. I refuse."

The guard who had spoken stood fast. "Then I draw my sword, sir, and command you!"

"NO!" Keldor screamed and rushed the guard, but the guard struck, his sword entering Keldor at his waist and exiting through his lower back. The guard

withdrew his weapon, his eyes wide with shock at what had happened. To the amazement of all three men, Keldor's wound healed before their eyes and he stood as new. He took advantage of the situation and leapt at the guard, breaking his neck. By the time the other guard had reacted, Keldor had already taken the sword of the first and made quick work of his new attacker, spinning back around to decapitate him.

Keldor stood over his fallen foes, panting and holding the sword with regaining strength. After disposing of the bodies by throwing them into the massive chasm that surrounded Grayskull, he gazed at the castle before him and laughed. "Ha! Foolish woman, you thought to curse me?!" Keldor smiled. "You have made me immortal!" He walked toward the hills in the distance, glancing back one last time. "And now, when the time is right, I will destroy you all."

■ ■ ■

Randor stared at the book in front of him and sighed. So, the Sorceress had been involved, as Skeletor had said. The woman had been Sorceress for only a short time when Keldor was exiled. Perhaps Randor had made a mistake sending his brother to her, inexperienced as she must have been. Why hadn't she told him of this? What else had she kept from him? More than that, what other truths lay hidden within Skeletor's words? He knew now that Skeletor was indeed somehow involved in Keldor's story to know such a detail. According to the account written here, there had been no witnesses to Keldor's transformation other than the Sorceress and Keldor himself. For Skeletor to know of the act proved that there was indeed more to his involvement. He knew of things he should have no knowledge of. How? Had he truly tortured Keldor as he had told Randor once, so long ago?

Throughout all of these years, Skeletor had not spoken of Keldor to Randor again during their rare face-to-face meetings. He'd remained curiously tight-lipped, so-to-speak, about Randor's brother since that fateful day when Randor had ridden to the Dark Hemisphere with vengeance in his heart. For what reason would Skeletor speak the truth on that day alone? To not mention it again? Perhaps during Skeletor's seventeen-year exile in that foul place he'd forgotten about Keldor. Perhaps Randor's brother was nothing to the dark sorcerer in the grand scheme of things. He also could have decided that the best way to torture Randor was to keep any other knowledge he held a secret. Either way, Randor knew that there was only one way to find out. He dropped his eyes back to the pages before him and began to read once more.

3.

THE SWORD OF DARKNESS

So you see, reader, how Keldor was cursed by that witch to live in a cold body, devoid of life, never able to grace me with a warm touch. From the moment I first laid eyes on Keldor, he immediately struck me as a person of power. I do not speak of sorcery, at least not at that point in time, but rather of a personal aura of authority. You must have seen it at some point in your lifetime: When a person walks into a room and immediately commands everyone's attention.

That was the feeling that gripped me in those early days. I only wished to serve him. In the beginning, I was practically subservient to him. He had me under a spell that I had never come across in my own arcane studies. Surely it was love. But that part of the story can wait. For now, I'll tell you the tale of how he first came upon the legendary Sword of Darkness, a weapon of great power that would shape not only his destiny, but my own, as well.

■ ■ ■

As a young boy wandering the wilderness and villages that surrounded the kingdom of Eternia, Keldor had often heard stories of the wondrous Power Sword. They spoke of a sword that acted as a key to both Castle Grayskull, and the untold power the structure held within it. It was also said that eons ago an evil force had captured the sword and almost won the power of the universe before the very first Sorceress stopped it. To prevent such a thing from ever happening again, the Sorceress used her magic to split the sword top to bottom, making two halves, male and female.

One half came to be known as the Sword of Light, the other as the Sword of Darkness. Only when the halves were joined once more would Tellus regain balance and the sword attain its full power. Each half had power of its own and was a powerful and dangerous weapon that no mere mortal should wield. Due to this immense power, either half could have posed a serious danger if it fell into the wrong hands. Because of this, the Sorceress hid the halves of the sword in different areas of Eternia. According to the legends, one half was hidden at Eternia's highest point, the other beneath its hardest rock.

The highest point is where Keldor was headed. He knew where it was for all Eternians saw it. The Great Mountain of Eternia was hard to miss. Few had dared to climb it out of fear and respect for the Sorceress. Of course, he no longer cared about the Sorceress. To bless him with immortality was far from a curse. If she were truly so foolish, then it was impossible for her to be as all knowing as the people believed her to be. Randor had beaten him, which shocked Keldor to no end. He had thought he was ready, but he had failed. The might of the Power Sword would give him the edge he would need for their next encounter.

Despite knowing his destination, however, Keldor was at an impasse. He had reached the mountain hours ago, and still had yet to find a place to start his ascent. After a time of continued searching, he eventually found a safe place to climb on the eastern side of the mountain. He did not know if he needed to be so cautious, but while his new form may withstand a blade, he would not risk a bloody fall from a great height. There were enough footholds and the angle was such that he thought he would be able climb it without much effort if he accessed it from this point. "At last!" His patience tested and rewarded, Keldor began to climb the mountain in earnest.

After nearly a full day of climbing with few breaks for rest, Keldor had finally reached the summit, where he began his search for the sword. It did not take long

for his keen eye. Along an old path worn into the crest of the mountain, he saw a glint of light. As he approached the source, he saw that one half of the legendary Power Sword had been thrust to the hilt into the hard ground, hidden in plain sight. Keldor tried to pull it out but found it difficult, as he was tired from his climb. He tried again with all of his might.

With a grunt of effort that led to a scream of straining muscles, he at last wrestled the half of the Power Sword from its hold, the effort knocking him to the ground. He gripped it tightly in his hand and smiled. It was his. He raised it in triumph and laughed in delight of his success.

Keldor looked at the sword with awe. It was an ancient weapon, but remained in immaculate shape, most likely due to its magical properties. It had a purple sheen in the bright light of Tellus's sun and he could feel its power resonating through him. "Soon I must learn the ways of magic so that I can wield the full power of the sword. Only then will I have my revenge and all that I am owed."

His first order of business would be to find the other half so that after he had become a sorcerer and merged the two, he could enter Castle Grayskull. Legends surrounded the castle and the power it held within it. With the power of the rejoined sword, he could claim not only his rightful kingdom of Eternia, but also everything that surrounded it. The entire universe could be his, as it should be. It would only be fair atonement for the kingdom that he was never given, and for the depths to which he'd had to sink as a child to survive. The thought reminded him of an old Gar saying he'd heard his mother use: "If I do not possess all, I possess nothing." Keldor smiled as he began his long decent back to the base of the mountain.

Despite his triumph where so many others had failed, he could not help wondering to himself why the sword had been so easy to attain. The climb was difficult, but locating and procuring the sword once he'd reached the crest had been fairly simple. He wondered if the Sorceress depended on the people's fear to prevent them from retrieving it, a fear of the climb and of her magic. If that were the case, then she truly was a fool, for he no longer feared her. With the Power Sword heavy on his back within a sheath he'd stolen from one of the Royal Guardsmen, he finally reached the bottom of the mountain. He heard something that puzzled him as he reached flat ground. It was the distinct sound of running water. "Strange that I had not heard it before. Perhaps in the zeal of my search, it did not register. Or have I descended in the wrong place?" He walked further around the mountain, to an area he had not yet been when he saw the source. "A great river does indeed flow through the mountains. I have heard of such a river, but have never seen it before with my own eyes."

"No Eternian citizen has, stranger."

Keldor turned, shocked to find that someone had crept up on him. His training and time spent in battle had honed his skills to the point that anyone in his

presence going unnoticed was nearly impossible. "Who goes there?" He saw a young woman, perhaps twenty years of age. Her pale skin glistened, appearing almost yellow in a trick of the sun's light. She wore a black tunic with purple accents and an armored helmet to match. In her hands was a staff, the tip holding a purple crystal, which shone brightly of its own accord.

"My name is Evelyn. I have been watching you since you arrived here. As for why you've never seen this place, the power of the sword you now carry allows you to pierce the veil of the spell that hides it." She walked closer to him and looked at his weapon. "The sword-" She reached for it, but Keldor's hand blocked her grasp, knocking hers gently to the side.

"Away, woman," he said patiently, as if to a child. "I've no quarrel with you, but I will make one if you do such a foolish thing again." He gazed upon her. She was as beautiful as any woman he had seen. Voluptuous and stunning, her piercing green eyes were perhaps her strongest feature. On any other day he may have used his wiles and charm to have her, but now, in his moment of triumph, she merely annoyed him.

"Ease yourself, Stranger." Her voice was soft and seductive. "Why do you covet the sword so much? Is it merely power, as most have said, or is it something more?" She eyed him, curious to hear this strange looking man's story.

"You ask a lot of questions for a strange girl in the forest. Who are you to make demands of me?" Keldor asked mockingly. He suddenly sensed a power emanating from the mysterious woman that reminded him of the Sorceress, and it took some effort on his part not to let his surprise show.

She smiled coyly, her voice growing dark. "I am the protector of the sword. Many a man has found it, only to be slain by me. Did you not wonder why it was so easy to wrest the weapon from its hold?" She looked absent-mindedly at her painted fingernails before returning her eyes to his. Her nonchalance was beginning to irritate him, which he assumed was her intention. "Men who wish to rule come here, one every year or so, to find the sword. But they find only death. What makes you different?"

"Because I should be ruling. I am Keldor of the House of Miro. It is my right. It is my destiny. I will not let you deter me from it." He drew the Power Sword half and slashed the weapon in her direction, but to his surprise the strange woman called Evelyn blocked his attack with her staff before knocking his weapon to the side almost effortlessly.

She raised her staff and launched powerful blasts of fire in his direction. He held up the sword to block the attack and the magical flames dissipated upon contact with his enchanted weapon. Evelyn spun to the right, swinging the base of her staff under her right arm and up toward his face. He parried the blow with his sword and slashed at her once more. She leapt effortlessly above the blade

and back flipped over him to a tree behind where he was standing. He turned and saw that she had used it as a springboard for a leap toward his neck and head, her staff held in front of her, now blasting lightning in his direction. Again he held up the Power Sword and deflected the attack, but she managed to strike him with a powerful kick before she landed.

She fought like no woman he had ever seen. He was in awe as she vanished in a wisp of smoke. He spun around as she reappeared behind him. Before he could attack, she drew a jagged dagger from her boot and stabbed him in the stomach, smiling as she did so.

“Ugh!” Keldor grunted and staggered backward. Her thrust was powerful, but in his new form, the pain quickly subsided and the wound healed even as she withdrew her blade. She stood aghast at his seemingly miraculous recovery and he once again took advantage of an opponent’s surprise, viciously knocking her to the ground. Her staff flew out of her hands, landing in the grass behind her. He lowered the Power Sword to her throat.

“You are defeated. I do not wish to kill you, though I will if I must. The sword is mine. You will not have it.” He looked her over once more. She was indeed beautiful. “I could use a warrior such as you. Do you wish to join me in my quest, Evelyn, or die by my hand? Choose your fate quickly.”

She smiled. “I have waited for one such as you: someone who could prove himself by besting me in combat. I’ve heard of you, Keldor, son of Miro, and I’ve liked what I’ve heard.” She paused, licking her lips tantalizingly. “I like what I see even better. We have much in common, you and I, as you will learn. I am with you, Sire.”

Keldor smiled at the title. “Excellent, my dear. I sense you have your own goals to achieve with this union, but be wary. If I even think you are to betray me, you will die.”

Keldor helped her to her feet and after she retrieved her staff, she stood beside him as they walked. “I understand. I am sure you wish to possess the other half of the sword, do you not?”

Keldor nodded. “Of course. I have heard stories-”

“Of Snake Mountain?” she asked.

He did not like that she had interrupted him, but allowed it. “Yes. ‘Beneath its hardest rock.’ Snake Mountain. That is where we are headed now.”

She pointed behind them. “Please excuse my correcting you, but the mountain is this way.”

They began walking in the opposite direction. Keldor was a proud man, and his error embarrassed him, but he would look at the good side of what had happened. "You seem to know much of this area. You may be more useful than I had originally thought."

"Thank you, my lord. I live only to serve you."

Keldor detected a touch of sarcasm in her tone, but chose to ignore it. He found himself giving Evelyn more leeway than he would most beings, but he supposed her beauty allowed her as much from most men. "See that you do and that you do it wisely." He pondered her role in his destiny and whether meeting her was dictated by fate. "You appear well-versed in the legends of this land, Evelyn, and I've already born witness to some of your power. Tell me," he paused. "What do you know of sorcery?"

Evelyn smiled. "As you saw during our battle, I'm no novice. Until recently, I was the apprentice of Kuduk Ungol, the Sorceress of Grayskull." Mentioning the name brought a brief look of anger to Evelyn's face, but it quickly faded.

The revelation surprised Keldor, who looked at her curiously. "I met the woman only days ago," Keldor stated.

Evelyn shook her head as they walked through the dense forest that surrounded the mountain. "That was not Kuduk Ungol. That was a girl who was given my rightful power. I served Ungol for years and she had the gall to betray me, even after I had worked so hard to please her. She chose that girl to take her place as Sorceress of Grayskull instead of me."

"Why?" he asked.

She looked at the ground as she spoke, feeling the sting of the memory. "To be honest, I don't know. Ungol mentioned something about a vision she had regarding my future, but she refused to explain her motives to me."

Keldor raised his eyebrows, acknowledging something he'd been pondering since his meeting with the Sorceress says before. "So there has been more than one, after all. Who is this new Sorceress? The one I met?"

"I don't know that, either. All I know is that she was a simple commoner, a farm girl with little knowledge of sorcery, which makes the entire situation even more insulting." She stopped walking and pulled a cloth from her belt, using it to shine the orb upon her staff, which had been dirtied during their brief battle. "So you see, Keldor, what we have in common. Your father cast you aside, as is well known to all of this land, just as Kuduk Ungol cast me aside. This world owes much to us both." She shot him a glance as she tucked the cloth back in her belt.

"But you continued to protect the sword, despite being betrayed by the prior

Sorceress.” Keldor said. “Why?”

She shrugged. “It’s simple. I cannot wield the sword. I don’t know why, but I couldn’t remove it from the ground, no matter what magic I used to aid me. So I’ve remained at my post, waiting, as I said before, for someone like you to come along. Someone worthy of betraying this new Sorceress. The idiot doesn’t even realize that since she took on her new role, I’ve continued my studies under someone else.”

Keldor gazed at her with an intense interest. “Who?”

Her eyes met his and a wicked smile formed on her lips. “Someone far more powerful than this new Sorceress. Even more powerful than Kuduk Ungol was in her prime.”

Plans began to take shape in his mind and he stopped, standing still beneath a large and cruelly twisted tree. “Evelyn?”

She turned to walk to his side, making an effort to appear as seductive as possible while doing so. “Yes, Keldor?”

When she got close enough to touch, he gently placed his fingers under her chin and raised it up so that their eyes could meet once more. “I have a feeling that our meeting was destined.”

He felt as if her gaze was searing into his soul as she grinned. Perhaps she was happy to finally have someone who accepted her. Someone with whom she felt she belonged.

■ ■ ■

Randor tore his gaze away from the book and sighed. He already knew that someday Evelyn would become Evil-Lyn. Duncan had confirmed that years before. Evil-Lyn was a cruel witch who had loyalty to no one but herself. Had she betrayed Keldor? As Randor had? He forced the latter thought from his mind, remembering that Keldor had betrayed him, not the other way around. His mind tended to play tricks on him after all of these years. It was easier to remember Keldor as a loving brother than as the man who had threatened to destroy him and his family.

He thought back to the days following Keldor’s betrayal. Randor’s castle had been quiet after the battle had ended and the furor over what had happened had died down. He remembered how his wife, the Queen Marlana, had reacted after Randor told her about Keldor’s attack and subsequent banishment. She was

upset and refused to talk to him for days. When she finally did, it was with a voice full of sadness. “What of children we may have?” She had asked him. “What will they know of their uncle?” Randor thought about what he had said to her; what had made her so angry. “Keldor is dead to us,” he had told her. “We will tell them that he disappeared in a mishap of magic, and that will be the end of it.”

As a young king, Randor had disliked the idea of his future children not knowing their uncle just as much as his wife, but had resigned himself to that inevitable truth. *He seemed like a good man once, when he first arrived here. How was I to know how it would end?* Letting the journal be for a moment, he thought back to their first meeting, years ago.

■ ■ ■

It was mid-autumn, and the freshly fallen leaves crunched under Randor’s boots as he made his way to Eternia’s city gate. His best friend, Duncan, walked next to him. They stopped before the massive drawbridge as it began making its slow descent.

It had been hard to find the man, as King Randor had commanded him, but eventually one of Duncan’s men, a young recruit named Trydor, ran across him sitting in a pub in a nearby village, back from a long hunt at the base of the surrounding mountains. Duncan seemed uneasy. He’d spent much of his youth fighting the Gar race that came down from the mountains, and having one of them, even half of one, living within the palace walls did not sit well with him. To say it made him uneasy was an understatement. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I don’t know, my friend. But yes, it feels like the right thing to do. We share my father’s blood, after all.” The fact that the wanderer known as Keldor was their king’s elder brother was no secret to the Eternian people. The exile of the former King Miro’s Gar lover Nira along with her child had been demanded by the people and was something still talked about to this day, albeit in hushed tones. They were different times back then, during a renewed war with the Gar, and perhaps now, in hindsight, many felt ashamed at the earlier outcry.

Regardless, Duncan still felt uneasy, though he tried to be supportive of the king, clapping his friend on the back. “Then I hope he’s a man as noble and good as you, Sire.”

Randor smiled. “Thank you, Duncan. I hope he’s half as noble and good as you think I am.” The two friends laughed as the huge gate completed its decent.

The man who stood on the other side had the pointed ears and blue skin of a Gar, but lighter in shade, due to his mixed heritage. He stood tall and broad, as the king did, and Randor recognized some of his late father's features in the face of the man whom he would soon be accepting into his home.

Keldor stood before them in clothes not unlike that of other wilderness dwellers, with leather trousers and tunic, and an animal pelt for a cloak. His half-brother, whom Randor had only heard of before now, had long black hair and a thick black beard. Although dressed as a man of the wild, Randor could already see that Keldor had a presence about him. A grandeur that could only be inherited through royal blood. He spoke to Duncan under his breath. "Here goes nothing." Randor crossed the drawbridge to meet the man named Keldor, his arms extended for an embrace. "It is truly good to meet you, brother!"

Keldor met the embrace and smiled, though it seemed to come with some effort. "It's good to be here... brother. It has been many years since I've seen the inside of this place."

"Then by all means, enter! Walk with me." Keldor met the king's pace as they turned and walked toward Duncan, who waited for them inside the gate. "Keldor, this is Duncan, Eternia's Man-At-Arms and a good friend."

Duncan bowed slightly. "Welcome home, Keldor."

Keldor smiled thinly. "Thank you. It's good to be back, although I'm not sure why you have searched me out, or welcomed me so openly."

Randor clasped his brother's shoulders. "Do not fear. I have sought you out because we are blood. Besides, I've always wanted a brother," he laughed. "But beyond that, I felt it was high time to correct my father's mistake. You were sent away before I was born, but, as I grew older, I heard and read about what happened. I have always disagreed with our father on your exile. In fact, it led to many a heated argument between us. He is gone now and though it saddens me deeply, an emptiness in my heart I can't fathom filling, I know that as one door closes, another opens, and my brother can finally enter my life as I've always wanted."

Keldor looked deep into Randor's eyes. "I hope I don't disappoint you."

"Nonsense. I can't make you a prince, Keldor, due to your mother not being the queen, but please join us as a lord of Eternia, with all of the benefits that that entails."

"A lord?" Keldor paused. A strange look crossed his face, only briefly, before it disappeared. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, I hope you'll say 'yes' so we can move on and I can introduce you to

my new wife!" They laughed together for the first time as they made their way to Eternos Palace.

■ ■ ■

Randor thought back to those early days and smiled. Joyous times followed Keldor's arrival, with the two brothers fighting side-by-side in the name and defense of Eternia. Unfortunately, they wouldn't last. In the years following their war with Count Marzo, Randor had felt his brother grow more distant, locking himself away in his study and losing himself in that evil wizard Marzo's books, sometimes for days at a time. Keldor had grown quiet and seemingly discontented with his life, despite all that Randor had given him. Rumors began to circulate that he coveted Randor's throne.

Randor had always ignored these rumors, as he loved his brother and was happy to finally have the connection that he'd always wanted, the kind only brothers share. But in the time leading up to Keldor's betrayal, even Randor had not been able to ignore the fact that that connection had seemingly withered and died on the vine. He had tried to repair it in his own way, but ultimately he'd had to send Keldor away again after his attempted coup. *He brought it upon himself*, thought Randor. *You must remember that.* He looked back at the journal before him and began to read once more.

■ ■ ■

It had taken several days for Keldor and Evelyn to reach Snake Mountain from the mystically veiled river near which they'd met. Finally, they were at the entrance. They had had to enter a cave at the base, and follow the dank and dark tunnels constructed eons ago to reach the structure upon the top of the mountain. Supposedly the same force that had almost conquered Castle Grayskull long ago had built this monstrous fortress. They were an ancient race of snake-like beings that walked and spoke as men, but Keldor knew that they were long extinct.

It was here that Keldor expected to find the other half of the sword, "beneath its hardest rock." Evelyn had confirmed for him that it was here, having been privy to such knowledge while learning from the Sorceress Kuduk Ungol. She stood by a large boulder. Keldor was walking toward her when she called to him. "Keldor, this is the place where the sword was supposed to have rested, but it is gone!" She pointed to a horizontal gash in the massive stone. "Look! This is where it was, I am sure of it!"

Keldor drew his half of the Power Sword. "Then it seems someone has beaten us to it."

"I have, Cursed One." The Sorceress stood above them, high upon the boulder, the other half of the Power Sword in her hand. It shone brightly and seemed to be made of polished silver and steel. "I knew of your finding this sword's sister, and of your converting Evelyn to your cause." She looked at the woman in black and frowned. "I'm disappointed in you, Evelyn. I know we are not friends, but I had thought that we could work together in service of Kuduk Ungol's memory." The Sorceress eyed Evelyn with sadness and was met with a glare filled with animosity.

"Curse her memory," Evelyn replied. "She betrayed me for a simple commoner."

The Sorceress shook her head sadly. "There is very little common about me now, Evelyn Morgan Powers. I am sorry you feel slighted, but it was not my choice." She moved her gaze toward Keldor, a slight smile curling her lips upward. "Evelyn helped you acquire the first half. Surely you did not think that you would get this half so easily?"

Keldor scoffed. "Maybe not easily, Sorceress, but I will have it, even if I have to destroy you to get it." Keldor began to climb the stone one-handed as he brandished his weapon, but Evelyn called to him once again.

"Wait, Keldor! Let me have her!" She raised her staff and it burned bright with her sorcery.

"So be it." Keldor stood down, watching Evelyn with a keen eye.

Evelyn began to chant an ancient spell, unknown to the Sorceress.

The Sorceress shivered as she felt the chill of evil sweep upon her. It was a type of spell she didn't understand and in fact could never comprehend. In her brief time learning with Kuduk Ungol and studying the spell books of Grayskull before the elder woman died, she had only learned spells that could be used for good. This was something altogether different. Something foul and unnatural. But it was too late. She watched in horror as her skin began to be covered with feathers. "What spell is this?" The eerie transformation continued for several moments until she was completely transformed into a green falcon. She tried to scream, but her voice came out as a bird's cry, piercing the near silence of the room.

"I have done it, Keldor! Now she is trapped in the form of the falcon Zoar whenever she's outside of her precious castle! The fool! We no longer have to worry about her!" Evelyn grinned a wicked smile, proud of her victory over her replacement.

Keldor smiled faintly. "Excellent work, Evelyn. Defeating the Sorceress is not an easy feat to accomplish. Despite her naiveté, she still possesses the power of Grayskull. I'm impressed. This is why I chose you. Go. Kill the bird and retrieve the sword." Keldor watched Evelyn take her first step up the boulder, the young woman struggling to gain solid footing.

Before she could ascend, the Sorceress, now trapped in her falcon form, grasped the sword in her talons and took flight, headed towards an opening in the wall high above them. "No!" Evelyn cried. She used her staff to hurl lightning bolts at the Sorceress, but to no avail. She was gone.

Keldor grimaced. "You disappoint me, Evelyn. To think you were doing so well. What will she do with the sword?"

She frowned and shook her head solemnly. "The future is always in motion. Any vision we see might not mean anything at all. There's no way to truly know."

"Try anyway," he commanded.

"As you wish." Evelyn raised her staff and began chanting another incantation, opening a veil in the air itself. They saw a heavily muscled man with a mane of blond hair holding the sword aloft, Castle Grayskull behind him.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

Evelyn gazed deeply into the veil, her eyes turning white as she delved deeper into the vision. "It seems... that one day, years in the future... she will find a champion... to defend Eternia with the sword... against an evil force..."

"Years in the future?" Keldor asked.

Her eyes returned to normal as she lowered her staff. "Possibly. Like I said, there's no way to know for sure. It's one of any number of possibilities."

"Then we need not worry about that now. Forget the sword for the time being. We'll have time to retrieve it later. The half that I have should surely be enough to accomplish my more immediate goals." He was disappointed that he had lost the other half of the sword, but pleased at their victory over the Sorceress of Grayskull. The legend about the reunited sword opening Grayskull could be just that: a myth. There were real goals to accomplish. "We must talk of magic. I need to be a powerful sorcerer to wield the Power Sword at its full strength, as you know."

She nodded. "Yes. You hold the Sword of Darkness in your hands. Its true power cannot be tapped without magic."

"The Sword of Darkness, you say?" Keldor knew that with the full power of

the sword, he would be able to defeat any meager defense the Sorceress could assemble, even if she did have the Sword of Light in her possession. "Tell me who trained you in the old ways, Evelyn. I have studied for years, but your spells are powerful and unknown to me. Even the Sorceress was made a fool by your dark magic."

Evelyn's face was warm with embarrassment, having disappointed this strange man she found so captivating, but also with anger at the fact that her replacement had still had the last laugh. She closed the magic veil and joined Keldor at his side. Upon doing so, she told him who had trained her.

Keldor smiled as he sheathed the Sword of Darkness on his back. "Come then, Evelyn. We will find this dark leader. We will find Hordak."

■ ■ ■

I had been waiting for someone like Keldor to come into my life. Someone with power and ambition, but also someone I could relate to. We seemed a perfect match as we'd both been cast aside in favor of lesser beings. We both only wanted what was owed us. I was ready to follow him to the end, not only to help him claim his rightful place as king of Eternia, but because doing so was my own way of gaining a measure of revenge against both Kuduk Ungol and the new Sorceress.

Know, Reader, that Keldor was also as handsome as any wanderer I'd come across while guarding that old relic. He bewitched me with his roguish smile alone. No magic was required to aid him, nor do I feel he would have wanted it to. In those early days I feel that I may have been more of an annoyance to him than anything else. A necessary burden, as he needed a guide. I pledged myself to him wholly.

We both changed over the years, and so did our feelings for each other. However, our first days together remain fond memories for me, the woman once known as Evelyn. As we continue, you will see and understand how Keldor was not an evil man incapable of love. I just don't think he really understood it.

■ ■ ■

Randor smiled, despite himself. Keldor had always been a bit of a womanizer in his days at Eternos Palace. His unique and exotic looks gained him many a female admirer in the early years, before the people began to fear him. He

had never committed himself to anyone, however. Evelyn had been right: love itself was a concept that Keldor had a difficult time with. He'd grown up alone, after all, cast out by his own father. Such an act would naturally make one wary of others.

Keldor's mother, who may have been the only person he'd felt love for after his banishment, had died when Keldor was still young. As an adult, he'd never been, to put it lightly, a very trusting individual. Randor had thought toward the end that the act of loving someone was just not in Keldor's physical make-up. To read that he had been wrong was reassuring, even if it was coming from someone who had obviously become, at some point, Evil-Lyn. That Keldor would come to love an evil witch somehow made the revelation a bit underwhelming.

Randor rose from his chair and left the small room. He asked Coranah, the faithful librarian who had made this all possible, if she would arrange for someone to bring him some food and drink. He would not be leaving his father's study any time soon. He returned to the small room and sat before the book again, drinking it in as he continued to read.

4.

THE DARK HEMISPHERE

Keldor knew that he would have to become a powerful sorcerer if he were to become the true master of the Sword of Darkness and rule Eternia. With the knowledge that I was trained in the dark arts by a powerful being, Keldor commanded me to bring him to this same sorcerer so that he could learn the dark arts as well. In order to truly master the might of the Sword of Darkness, it was imperative that that he take his meager studies of sorcery to a new level.

He had spent years combing the libraries of Eternia for such knowledge, but much of it had been lost over the ages. Lost, or hidden. Keldor had discovered Count Marzo's books and studied them as much as possible, but reading a book on spells is not akin to actual practice. It's like having the ingredients for an alchemic mixture, but not knowing the recipe.

Count Marzo is a powerful wizard, but a sorcerer is something altogether different, their power coming from within, rather than from trinkets and potions. I could have taught him, but I feel that he feared what could have happened if he'd given me any sort of power over him, that I would become the master in our relationship, rather than the apprentice. So Hordak was his answer.

Little did Keldor know at the time of his asking that Hordak was the ruler of

the evil Horde, a massive army that traveled from dimension to dimension, from world to world, to conquer each and every one. This presented Keldor with a problem. Hordak was not on Tellus. He was not even in the same realm, having been banished to the dimension of Despondos by an enemy centuries before.

I, however, knew of an alternative means of communication.

■ ■ ■

Within Snake Mountain, Keldor sat on a great throne, a relic from another age. As he sat, he took in the throne room for what it was: ancient, wet and dirty. Legend said that the fortress itself was not constructed, but rather that it was converted from the body of the snake god, Serpos. It certainly looked it, as all of its architecture was rounded in shape, and the details carved into the walls resembled thousands of tiny bones. He heard footsteps coming from the long hallway that lead to the ancient throne room in which he sat.

“This place is massive.” Evelyn’s soothing voice echoed as she entered the large chamber. She was not wearing her helmet, and her stark white hair stood out among her dark surroundings as it rested softly on her pale shoulders. “Surely, it must have been built by the Snake Men. Perhaps King Hiss himself.”

“Perhaps.”

“You should claim it, Keldor.”

“I already have.” It had been nearly a week’s time since Keldor had lost the other half of the Power Sword to the Sorceress of Grayskull. He’d nearly had it in his grasp and the thought angered him. In that time, he and Evelyn had grown closer in their solitude. They indeed had much in common and found that they enjoyed each other’s company greatly. Keldor had learned long ago that it was good to have allies, although he also knew that it was best to keep an eye on those around you. He wouldn’t say he fully trusted her yet, but she seemed to support him and this early into his new endeavor of studying true sorcery, that would have to be enough. “Tell me again of Hordak’s temple.”

“It’s deep in the Dark Hemisphere, built an eon ago by primitives he had enslaved. It was once the focal point of his power on Tellus, and it still holds some of its own, even after all of this time.”

He leaned forward on the great throne. “And this is where you first discovered his spirit?”

Evelyn approached him and ran her hands along the intricate carvings of

the chair, sculpted to look like a pile of skulls, human and otherwise. “Yes, but not his spirit, really. More like his essence. Despite being imprisoned in Despondos, he is very much alive. His power lingers in that temple, regardless of his absence. It remains to this day his strongest connection to this dimension.”

Keldor sighed impatiently. “Why can’t you just summon him here?”

She gazed deep into his eyes, a serious look crossing her face. “Hordak isn’t summoned. He calls to you if he feels you are worthy.”

“And you’re saying that I’m not?”

Her eyes pierced his very being momentarily, but the hard look in them quickly softened. “I wouldn’t dare speak such a thing. I simply don’t think that he can reach this far.”

Keldor thought a moment. “But you’ve been to his temple before?”

Her fingers traced along his heavily muscled arm. “Yes, though it has been many years. He used to communicate with me through the orb in my staff when I protected the Sword of Darkness, but it’s possible that he’s lost track of me now.”

“Are you up for the journey?”

Her eyes flicked away. “If you so command it.”

“I do.”

She looked back and gently grasped his shoulder. “Then yes. But it will not be an easy task, Keldor.”

Keldor nodded. “I didn’t assume that it would be, but I have fought in many battles. For survival during my first exile, and in war alongside the Eternians. There isn’t anything on the Dark Hemisphere that I cannot handle.”

The dark sorceress smiled thinly and gently sat on his knee, her fingers playing in his hair. She looked him in the eyes once more, making sure that he would listen to what she was about to say. “I have faith in you, Keldor,” she paused, “but there are terrors that await us on this journey that even you cannot imagine.”

■ ■ ■

The next morning, Evelyn awoke alone. She gathered her things from

Keldor's quarters and, after she'd dressed, made her way to his new throne room. As she turned the corner, she saw him, naked from the waist up, his hair pulled back. He was clutching his half of the Power Sword and was in the middle of his morning ritual, spinning it aptly in his warrior hands while chanting under his breath. It began to glow with a slightly purplish fire, but flickered out when he noticed her presence. She frowned. "I'm sorry."

He stood straight and stared at the weapon in his hands. "I can begin to tap the sword's power, but I can't sustain it. I don't have enough knowledge of its magic."

"In time, you will."

He sighed quietly. "If not, this will all have been in vain."

"You are doing very well. I've never seen someone connect to the sword so quickly. Many men who came after it thought that they had great power." She licked her lips. "They learned that they did not when they fell before my blade."

"It is true that you are a mighty warrior, Evelyn."

"Thank you." Her mouth curved into a smile. "I know you wouldn't have chosen me to fight alongside you if I was not. My point is that the sword belongs in your hands. It's only a matter of time before you control it fully. If I were not mistaken, I would say sorcery was in your blood."

He gazed at her, wondering how much of what she said was posturing, attempting to remain in his good graces. "You are not mistaken."

Evelyn's eyebrows raised. "Not your father, surely. Your mother?"

"Yes," he nodded.

Evelyn looked confused. "I thought she was just some random Gar named Nira? No offense intended, of course, but that's what I had heard."

He nodded once more. "That is the name she went by at the time, but not who she truly was."

"Who was she then? I mean who was she, really?"

"My mother was a Gar witch named Shokoti." Keldor glanced back at Evelyn and saw her flinch. "I see that you've heard of her."

She took a moment to regain her composure. "Yes, of course I have. She was very powerful and feared by many. How is this possible? Surely King Miro would have known?"

Keldor shook his head. "He did not. She used a spell of illusion to disguise her identity, and if I am correct in my own musings, she most likely used another spell to seduce him. I was not a product of love, my dear. I was merely a means to an end for my mother. A pawn in one of her schemes to greater power."

"The throne?"

"I would imagine so. After the people turned on her and Miro saw through her spell, we were cast out, and she had little use for me. I've told others throughout my life that she was eaten by beasts." He laughed slightly. "I even told Randor this as we battled."

"Is it not the truth?"

He shrugged. "What is truth, besides that which we tell ourselves? To me, her death at the whim of wild beasts is the truth, or at least it has been what I've wanted to believe my whole life. The real truth is that she abandoned me within the first few years and I never saw her again. I was a weak link to her. Another mouth to feed."

"But she disappeared. What happened to her?"

"I've heard that she ran afoul of another sorcerer, one more powerful than her. She was defeated and sent a thousand years into the past." He shrugged slightly. "I don't know if it's true."

Evelyn looked at Keldor with sorrow in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Keldor. I didn't know."

He waved away her comment with his hand. "Save your pity. That's not why I've told you this."

"Then why?"

"You are my ally. We should be open with each other. Besides, I was wondering if sharing her blood would aid me in my quest. It would be a comfort to have finally gotten something in return for the witch abandoning me."

"Yes, I'm sure it will help greatly. Most of my own power comes from my father, who passed it on to me."

His interest perked. "And who is your father?"

"He is known as The Faceless One."

"I'm afraid I haven't heard of him."

"I wouldn't have expected otherwise. He doesn't get out much." She looked away, seemingly embarrassed at having mentioned her father.

"He must have been powerful to produce a warrior of your caliber."

She looked back at Keldor and smiled. "Thank you. Your words mean much to me. My father and I-" she paused, "haven't always gotten along. But his power was a gift to me."

Keldor walked to his throne, where he'd left the rest of his attire, and dressed. When he was finished, he turned to her. "It's time."

"Then I'll show you the way, but I must warn you. Hordak's power lingering in the temple," she paused once more, but this time not out of embarrassment, but for emphasis. It was imperative that Keldor listened to what she was about to tell him. "It's not natural, even for sorcery."

He looked back at her as he sheathed his sword. "What do you mean?"

"It's more like... a disease."

"If this is the path our journey must take to continue, my dear, then it is the path I must follow."

He said it with such conviction that she was inclined to believe him. "I understand. I just want you to understand the danger."

"I do not fear the ghostly apparition of a forgotten sorcerer. We will be fine."

She nodded, but still seemed apprehensive. They made their way out of Snake Mountain and headed east, further into the Dark Hemisphere and the evils that thrived within it. Evelyn spoke as they walked. "Eons ago, Hordak actually created the Dark Hemisphere. Did you know this?"

"No. I have studied much of the history of the planet through the libraries of the Eternian Palace, but there was never an explanation given as to this foul place's creation. I assumed it was related to magic, as anyone can see that it is unnatural." This sorcerer Hordak must have indeed been very powerful to have affected the entire planet in this manner.

"It was a spell of separation. He intended to use it to give evil more of a foothold on this world, and grant himself more power in the process. He realized, almost too late, that it was about to split the planet in half, and he had to stop the spell quickly, or all would have been lost."

He chuckled. "A powerful sorcerer indeed, though perhaps short-sighted."

They both laughed at his remark and Evelyn smiled. "It's true, I swear."

"I believe you, but I have to wonder why I'm willing to risk life and limb traveling the Dark Hemisphere to learn from someone who almost destroyed the very planet he was trying to rule."

She thought for a moment. "It acts as a lesson, Keldor."

He pondered her point, looking for the answer that she was seeking from him. "That absolute power is not meant to be in the hands of one lone man? That it corrupts absolutely?"

"No." She smiled faintly. "It means to use the power wisely." She paused and looked toward the ground before speaking again. "I believe that by ruling Eternia, you will use your position of power to finally unite Tellus."

"Unite it how?"

She raised her eyes to him once more. "Under you, of course."

"Under me?"

"Yes."

He chuckled. "How very noble of me."

"Call it what you will, Keldor, but I sense great things in your future. This world is full of injustice. That I was passed over and not chosen to be the new Sorceress. That you were cast out, your kingdom given to your younger brother. Despite my loathing for this place, much of that very loathing is due to the fact that it has no direction, no purpose. You could give it those things."

"Perhaps."

She frowned. "You think that I'm patronizing you?"

He laughed softly. "No. It amuses me. I merely want that which is rightfully mine by birthright, but perhaps you are right, and Eternia, and the Power Sword, as well, are simply a means to an end to true power."

She smiled as she gazed at him. "A stepping stone to greatness."

He peered deeply into her eyes, studying them, and he could see a passion there; for him, he thought, but perhaps for something else, as well. Something she was trying to hide. Keldor sensed the unknown about this dark sorceress who would guide him on his journey. He took in the sight of her and once again pondered what role she would ultimately play in his destiny. Would she be his

savior and the road to all that he desired, or would she betray him, as everyone else had?

■ ■ ■

Their quest took them deep into the dark side of the planet, and the presence of evil permeated everything around them. Keldor could feel it penetrate him, entering his soul and festering there. He wondered if Evelyn sensed it as well, but he did not ask her. It may just be in his mind and he didn't want to sound like a fool.

As night fell on the second day of their journey, they entered a dark forest, in search of a place to make camp. The trees were twisted and misshapen, cruelly formed out of the small patches of earth that separated the boulders and gravel that made up most of this side of the planet. Evelyn shot him a panicked look and whispered, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Just then, he picked up the sound of a deep rumble coming from beside them, as if the ground itself were moving. Sweat beaded on his cold forehead when he recognized it as the growl of a wild beast, and a rush of memories nearly overwhelmed him before he fought them away and calmed himself. He'd dealt with many a beast in his youth. There was nothing to fear.

"That," she hissed

"Yes. Calm yourself." He held his hand up, trying to ease her mind. "We have nothing to be afraid of."

"Says you. You can't die. I can."

Suddenly a giant dylinx cat lunged at them, not from the side, as Keldor had been anticipating, but from above. It landed on Evelyn, targeting what it saw as the smaller, weaker prey. It stood nearly five feet tall and its fur was a purple so dark it bordered on black. Keldor had never seen a cat of this color before in person. Snarling at her, the dylinx suddenly whelped in shock when she jolted it with an electric bolt from her staff. The giant cat leapt off of her, and turned its gaze to him. The massive animal moved slowly, methodically toward him. Keldor locked its eyes in a stare and stood his ground. It stopped mere feet from him and went still as a statue, gazing into his eyes. Keldor began to quietly mouth an incantation, his voice too low for Evelyn to hear. He'd learned the spell years ago in his studies at the palace, but hadn't thought he'd ever need it. It would make even the mightiest of beasts submissive, but he had to admit that he wasn't sure it would work. After what felt like hours, it turned its head and sat down nearby.

Evelyn whispered, "You never even drew your sword."

Keldor smiled confidently. "I've run across giant cats like this one before, though a different species. You have to let it know that you are the dominant presence; that it's not worth a fight."

"I think he just likes you." The deep, rumbling voice startled the both of them, and they turned to Keldor's right, where it seemed to have come from, but they saw nothing. With little warning, a hulking beast of a man dropped from another tree, landing near Keldor, dwarfing him in size. A thick fur covered the creature's entire body, save for his face, and he seemed more animal than man. Upon his back was a large, oddly shaped sack. Keldor wondered if perhaps it contained the corpse of an animal that the large creature had hunted.

Keldor looked up at the monster before him. "And who might you be?"

"Raquill Rqazz of the vine jungle, though your kind usually just call me 'Beast Man.' I am the master of any beast I come across. Except that one." He indicated the giant cat that had attacked them. "He doesn't listen to me. I've tried to catch him for days. I call him Panthor."

Keldor eyed the large dylinx cat as it walked up to him, the volume of its purr startling in the darkness of night as it exhaled. He reached down and pet its massive head. "Panthor?"

"Well," the giant man-beast paused, "it's easy for me to remember."

"I see," Keldor said as he turned his gaze back to the creature talking to him. A simpleton, most likely, but a brute, to be sure, and probably intensely intimidating in battle. He would be a worthy ally for his frightening appearance, alone. Keldor decided that he would speak simply to this creature in an attempt to gain his trust. "Have you been following us, Beast Man?"

"I was following Panthor. He was following you. But he won't leave you now. You've created a bond with him."

Keldor looked up dismissively. "Oh, really?"

"Yes. He's a rare breed in these parts, not native. I would know. I know all the beasts of the Dark Hemisphere. Dylinx's like Panthor are fond of blue-skinned people, like you. I think that's where they come from."

Any type of bonding to the creature wasn't the intent of the spell. Perhaps the Beast Man knew more about this type of giant cat than Keldor did, which he had to admit wasn't much. It wasn't unusual for an animal to be domesticated, but it never happened instantaneously. It was entirely possible that it did come from the Gar mountains. Keldor had only been there once, as a boy. He took in the

sight of the huge brute of a man before him, impressed with his foreboding presence, if not his intelligence. "I am Keldor, Beast Man, rightful ruler of Eternia. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes, but it's very far away."

"Yes, it is. But I'll return there someday, and when I do, it will be mine."

Beast Man shrugged. "Why should I care?"

Keldor sensed that Beast Man was asking honestly, like a child, so he kept his anger in check. "Because if you help me attain this goal, I'll let you partake in the spoils of war."

"I don't care about spoils. Just beasts."

Keldor continued undeterred. "Then your reward will be that you can have all of the beasts you want, and keep them in the dungeon of my home, Snake Mountain, for safe keeping."

"Snake Mountain?" The Beast Man frowned, "that place gives me the creeps."

Keldor smiled. "I find that it suits me." He nodded his head in Panthor's direction. "I don't suppose you can take this cat with you?"

He shook his head. "No. I told you. Panthor is bonded to you now. He'll do as you ask, even assist you in battle. And you can ride him with this." Beast Man pulled a large leather saddle out of the massive sack he wore on his back. "I was hoping to use it if I tamed him, but it's useless to me now." He handed the saddle to Keldor, who took it, surprised at the craftsmanship and heft of the thing.

"I appreciate the gift."

"It's not for you. It's for him, to help his back."

Evelyn, having recovered from the initial shock of the attack and the appearance of their strange visitor, approached from the left and grinned. "How very sweet of you."

"Thanks, lady," Beast Man said, unaware of her sarcasm. He looked the two travelers over. "Where are you headed now? You're pretty far from Snake Mountain."

"Hordak's temple," Keldor answered. "Do you wish to join us?"

He balked at the words. "Hordak's temple? No way."

Keldor nodded. "Very well, but if you do decide to join me, you know I'll be in one of those two places."

"I'll think about it." With that, he climbed the tree again, and swung off, away from Keldor, Evelyn and Keldor's unwanted new pet.

Evelyn groaned as her face contorted into one of disgust. "What a ghastly beast. And the smell of him. How foul."

"Yes, but it's the size of him that got my notice. I've never seen anything like him. It's a safe bet that Randor and his army never have, either. The sight of a beast like that charging you could be enough to make some of them flee."

She rolled her eyes. "Ugh. 'Fleas,' you mean."

He gave her a smile that had a slight touch of exasperation. "Eternia is just the beginning and I'll need more warriors if I'm to rule. You know this."

"I'm not enough?"

"You serve me well, Evelyn, and you're very powerful, but you are the Tabarak card I plan to keep hidden."

"Oh?"

"Yes, it should be rather fun to unleash your power when they least expect it."

She grinned wickedly. "On second thought, I like the sound of that."

■ ■ ■

I didn't like having to share potential glory with other men or beasts. More than that, I didn't like the thought of competing for Keldor's attention. No one he could gather would prove to be as loyal to him as I was. I knew that this would be the case, but I didn't voice my opinion to Keldor. He would have accused me of being jealous, and he would have been right. Never in a hundred eons, however, would I have admitted to being jealous of a hairy creature of the jungles like Beast Man. He disgusted me.

...

Randor turned back several pages in the journal to confirm what he had read. His shock at discovering that the evil witch Shokoti was Keldor's mother caused his hand to tremble. The Eternian people had been correct in their accusations. They'd suspected his father's live-in mistress Nira of performing evil magic, and they were right. Keldor, unfortunately, was innocent in that situation. How could he not have been? He had only been a boy at the time. The thought of a parent using their child as a mere tool, a stepping-stone to power, sickened Randor. Shokoti had abandoned him to the wild. He could never imagine doing that to his own son. How could anyone with a heart?

The worst thing of all was a truth that Randor knew but Keldor did not. He had read of Keldor's situation in his father's journals years ago. He had tried to tell his half-brother the truth of their father's feelings during their battle, but he would not listen. The truth was that Shokoti's spell may have pulled the wool over Miro's eyes, causing him to think he loved her, but Miro's love for Keldor had been true. How could he not love his own son? Randor knew his father better than that. There was no possible way Miro could have been so cruel. Unlike Shokoti, Miro had plenty of heart, but the people of Eternia would not abide a Gar in the palace during the war, especially with a recognized heir on the way. After the truth about Shokoti's purpose, if not her identity, had been realized, they were even more zealous in their efforts to make this known to the king.

Miro's including Keldor in Shokoti's banishment had been a moment of weakness on his part, and although Randor was sure now that Keldor would never have believed him, it was a choice that their father had regretted for the rest of his life. Miro would never admit as much openly to Randor, in fact he often refused to talk about Keldor at all, but this was not out of a dismissive attitude toward his elder son. Randor would learn from his father's journals, after his death, that it was due to the pain and shame he felt over his choice.

Randor thought of Shokoti once more as he sat back in the chair of his father's study and closed his eyes. Knowledge can be a heavy burden. Was it worth it? Should he continue to read this journal? Or would more be revealed that he'd wish he had not learned?

5.

A QUEEN'S CONCERN

Queen Teela walked briskly into the large main room of Eternos Library. She had received word from her father-in-law that he would be in his father's study going over a new discovery. A journal or chronicle of some sort. That was three days ago and she couldn't help but be a little worried. It wasn't unusual for Randor to become engrossed in a new literary find, but he'd never disappeared for days at a time before. This was different. It had been too long since she'd seen him and she couldn't help but feel a sense of unease.

As she made her way toward the private study, the librarian Coranah stepped in front of her. The older woman smiled warmly. "Greetings, my queen," she said cheerfully. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No, thank you, Coranah. I'm simply looking for the king's father." Teela began to walk around the woman, but the librarian instead walked with her.

"I'm afraid he has asked for the utmost privacy," Coranah said, a slight irritation creeping into her voice.

"I'm sure that he won't mind," Teela replied. As she saw a sour look cross the librarian's face, Teela decided to make a verbal stand. As queen, Coranah

could not refuse her. "I really must insist."

The woman's expression changed quickly. "Of course, your highness. I didn't mean to overextend my boundaries, I simply wished to do as I was asked by the former king."

Teela nodded. "I understand. I'll only be a minute, I promise."

The elder woman seemed to pause in a moment of consideration. "Yes, of course." Coranah bowed quickly before retreating back into the stacks of books and scrolls that surrounded them.

Teela approached the old study and knocked gently at the door. A moment later, she heard Randor's voice coming from within. "Coranah? I had asked not to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry, father. It's me, Teela."

Silence. A moment later, she heard a lock unlatch and the door to King Miro's study opened, revealing her father-in-law, Randor. He looked more tired than usual, and a little haggard. Dark circles under his eyes gave the impression that he hadn't slept in days. Despite this, he smiled warmly as their eyes met. "Teela, how nice to see you. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, father, I was simply worried about you. I received your message, so please, forgive me for interrupting, but that was three days ago. I was becoming worried."

Randor seemed to take a moment to think, possibly gauging the passage of time in his mind. "You're right, perhaps it has been some time, but there is nothing to worry about. I'm merely engrossed in this new acquisition. It's related to my family, you know."

"It is?"

"Oh, yes. It's fascinating."

She eyed him curiously. "You're sure you're alright?"

Randor laughed. "Yes, yes, of course. Don't worry about me, Teela. Everything's fine."

She nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Alright, then. Forgive me for disturbing you."

"Nonsense, my dear. I appreciate the thought." As she turned to leave, he spoke again. "Teela?"

She turned back toward him in response. “Yes, father?”

A look came over the former king’s face that caused her worry to return anew. “I just wanted to tell you how much I love you, and that I’m glad you and Adam finally got some sense and realized you were perfect for each other. I couldn’t ask for a better wife for my son.”

She smiled, although she still felt that something was amiss. “Thank you. Not only do I have a wonderful husband, but I now have the two best fathers on all of Tellus.”

He returned her smile, albeit faintly, as he slowly closed the door once more. Adam was currently away from Eternia, mediating a situation between two sister kingdoms. Teela wished he were here, so that she could have him speak to his father. She still felt a great sense of unease. *Adam, she thought. I hope you return quickly.*

■ ■ ■

Two days later, King Adam admired the grandeur of Eternos Palace as he returned home from a long journey. Most notable for its series of lofty towers, he took a moment to glance back at them as he entered. He knew that, as a very young child, he’d been in one of those towers with his mother and twin sister Adora when Adora was stolen. His parents hadn’t talked about that day much when he was younger. However, as he’d aged, and especially since his mother had died, his father had opened up to him about it on several occasions. Adam and Teela had no children of their own. Although they planned to some day, it was impossible for Adam to truly imagine what it had been like for his parents to have their daughter ripped away from them.

Back on that fateful day, an invading celestial conqueror named Hordak had chosen between Adam and Adora. He chose his sister. One of the most haunting aspects of this was that they never learned why. Adam knew that both that looming question and the loss of Adora pained his father to this day. Adam didn’t remember Adora at all, however. She was like a ghost to him in a lot of ways, as he imagined Randor’s brother was to him. At least his father had known his brother. Adam would feel cheated if he had not had such a superb childhood with his family and friends like Teela, her father, Duncan, and his pet tiger Cringer.

King Adam was tall and broad, like his father. His long blonde hair which, when loose, hung to his shoulders, was pulled back into a ponytail. He wore an ornate gold armor reminiscent of the former king’s with a royal blue cape that draped his shoulders and flowed behind him as he made his way through the

palace. The gold crown he wore was once his father's and although he'd often heard it said that it was a heavy head that wore the crown, he couldn't help but disagree today. He was in a celebratory mood due to his part in the successful negotiations between two rival kingdoms. He had been brought in as a mediator as he was a neutral party in the situation and was proud to have been able to help the two sides see things from a mutually beneficial viewpoint.

As he entered the great hall with the array of guards that had accompanied him on his journey, a member of the Palace Guard named Tyrok quickly approached him. "Welcome back, your majesty. I was told to inform you that the queen wishes to see you immediately. She is in your quarters. She would not say why, but I feel it was quite urgent."

Adam clapped the man on the shoulder and smiled. "Yes, of course."

Tyrok walked with Adam to the end of the hall, where he entered a staircase that led to their quarters. "The negotiations went well, Sire?"

"Very well, thank you. I shall inform the queen of our success." Adam made his way to his room and thought of his luck. Teela was his queen. It was hard to believe. She'd spent much of their adolescence as his best friend, but there had never been anything more between them. So many things had changed. His father, having grown weary of the throne, had proclaimed Adam king. Adam had questioned his father about why he had made such a decision, but other than the usual "I'm so proud of you" speech, he'd never gotten a real answer on the matter. He had a feeling that his father had simply had enough of the throne after his mother's death and wanted to help him as he learned the challenges of it himself.

As with his relationship with Teela, many other things had changed, as well. Now the people looked to Adam instead of his father, and he had so many responsibilities. More than he had expected. There was, for instance, this recent trip to the lands of Avion as a mediator between the Avionians and the Aquarians. Stratos, an old ally, led the Avionians while Squidish Rex, a longtime enemy who had once gone by the name of Mer-Man, ruled the Aquarians. Adam was surprised to learn that, now that he no longer served Skeletor, the Aquarian king was actually quite willing to make a deal for peace, wanting only to protect his people and to be left alone by the surface world. As of late, even those who were not Eternian respected Adam and looked to him as a voice of reason. It was quite the change from a time when people thought of him only as "young Prince Adam," a flighty, if not wholly irresponsible, young man.

As he approached his chambers, the lone guard snapped to attention and bowed, acknowledging his king. Adam nodded to him in a friendly manner, contrasting the formal gesture given. He was still not used to men he had known for years suddenly showing him such respect. He wondered if it was something he would ever get used to. He opened the door to his chambers and entered. Upon walking into the large room, he saw his wife, Teela, looking out the tall

window to the city below. Once captain of the guard, Teela had had to resign from her post when she became queen. He knew that the lure of action still tugged at her. She had always been a warrior at heart. Teela took after her adoptive father, Duncan, in that regard. She was statuesque, standing taller than many Eternian women, and Adam knew that under her ornate gown, she still had the build of a fighter. This past year as queen had done nothing to tame her training. Her reddish blonde hair cascaded down her back and the silver crown upon her head glinted in the sunlight from the window. Upon hearing him enter the room, she turned and smiled. "Adam! I'm so glad you're back!"

As she rushed to embrace him, he returned her smile and took her into his arms warmly. "I've only just arrived."

She squeezed him tight. "Yes, I saw from the window. And heard as well. The people gave you quite the fanfare."

He smiled once more as she pulled away from their embrace. "One more thing I'm not sure I'll ever get used to," he said. Adam looked his wife in the eyes and saw a feeling of concern hiding beneath their surface. "I was told you needed to see me right away. Is something wrong?"

She sighed. "I'm not sure, actually. Your father has been acting very strange."

"How so?"

She stepped away from him and sat on the edge of the large bed that served as the centerpiece of the room. "He sent word to me some days ago saying that a journal had been discovered. He said he would be dedicating some time to reading it and not to worry, but I can't help it. He didn't even tell me in person and after three whole days of not seeing him, I finally went to him myself. The librarian, Coranah, even tried to turn me away, but I insisted. I saw him briefly, and he seemed well enough, but I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. It's been another two days since then, and still nothing. He's even had his meals brought to him in his father's old study."

Adam sat down beside her. "It's not unlike my father to dedicate himself to something fully."

"I know that, it's just that this seems different. Seeing him, I was at least happy to know that the message was true and that he was out of danger, but it was strange. He remained vague about the new book he was so engrossed in, but he did mention that it related to his family. Out of respect for your father's wishes, I didn't see fit to further press the matter." She paused. "I think you should talk to him."

He nodded in acknowledgement. "I will, if you think it's necessary. I miss

him, myself. I'd like to see him, regardless."

"Good. Surely, Coranah won't try to turn you away. I can't help but think that my worrying is for nothing, but I love your father. He's always been like family to me, ever since I was a child. I feel that this journal is not something simple, like his studies of his father's writings. For him to be so absorbed by it, I think that it's more important."

Adam smiled knowingly. "I have a feeling I know what it's about. A particular obsession my father has had for some time now."

She perked as she made the connection. "His brother?"

"That's what I'm thinking, yes."

"That would make sense. He's always been unsure of what happened to him, and now that he's given you the throne, he has more time to dedicate to his search for answers. I should have thought of that myself. This last year has made me soft."

Adam laughed. "Tell that to your sparring partners."

She smiled as she thought of her continued training. Teela felt that sometimes, with the responsibilities of the kingdom now weighing on Adam and herself, it was the only thing that kept her sane. "Maybe this is the breakthrough that he's been looking for?"

"Perhaps it is."

She smiled faintly. "I hope it is about Keldor. He will be happy to finally have an answer as to his brother's disappearance, if that's what this is. I feel a bit silly now."

"Don't be. I'm grateful that you're here to worry about him when I'm not." He chuckled as he stood up once more. "I'll go see him now and see how he's doing."

"Thank you, Adam. Oh, I almost forgot! Did the negotiations go well?"

"They were very successful. That old Mer-Man isn't so bad now that he's no longer under Skeletor's thumb."

She raised her eyebrows curiously. "That's surprising to hear."

"More to me, than anyone," he said. She smiled and he returned it. His being He-Man was a secret that few knew and Teela was now among them. He'd always known that if she were to become anything more than a friend to him, that

it was her right to know the truth. He had told her the same day that he'd asked her to be his wife. Teela had always been friendly with him, but he knew that she loved He-Man for his honesty, faithfulness, and his own innate goodness. She once told him that the day she found out that He-Man was also her best friend was one that she considered second only to their wedding day. He was glad that there were no longer any secrets between them.

■ ■ ■

"Randor, you've spent far too much time cooped up in this Palace. You don't know what you're missing!" Keldor laughed as he took a bite of smoked trog.

"I haven't been as cooped up as you think, dear brother, but I know when to trust my sense of smell, and this so-called delicacy you had brought to the palace from the outer territories smells foul indeed," Randor grimaced.

The King sat at the head of the small and private dining table, Keldor at his left and Duncan at his right. Adjacent to him was his wife, the Queen Marlena. Duncan pulled a piece off of the lizard-like creature and took a bite. After a moment of thought, he spoke. "Tastes like chicken."

Marlena laughed as she too took a bite. "It's not bad, Randor, really." She made a face. "A little chewy, maybe."

Randor turned up his nose as he took a bite himself. Chewing the piece of meat, he couldn't help but admit that she was right. It wasn't bad at all. "Humph. Well, it still smells awful."

Keldor smiled at him and laughed. "That's what the wine is for, brother. It dulls the senses enough to make it enjoyable." He took a long drink from his goblet.

They all broke into a fit of laughter as they continued their meal.

Randor was in the middle of a rather pleasant dream of Keldor's early days at his side, a time when his brother seemed to genuinely enjoy his company, when he was roused from his sleep by a knocking at the study door. He was annoyed to see that he had fallen asleep again, but as the days went on, he found it becoming more and more common, despite his resolve to stay awake and continue to make his way through the chronicle that Evelyn had written. "Yes, yes. Who is it?" he answered.

"It's me, Adam."

Randor smiled and began to get up from the chair, before glancing at the old journal on the desk and quickly closing it. He arose and went to the door, unlocking and opening it to the sight of his son, so handsome in his kingly attire. The sight brought another smile to Randor's face as he embraced his son for the first time since the young king had left to aid Avion with their dispute against the Aquarians. "Adam, my boy." He let go and grasped his son by his shoulders, proud of the man he had become. "I take it everything went well?"

"Yes, father. Everything went peacefully and an agreement was met with little trouble."

Randor grinned with pride. "Good. Good. So why are you here seeing an old man and not your lovely wife?"

Adam laughed. "Don't worry, father, I saw her right away. In fact, it's more than just my missing you that brings me here. She wanted me to come and see you. She's worried about you. She said you've been in here for nearly five days, that you only spoke once, and that even that was only because she came to see you two days ago."

"Has it been that long?" Randor seemed to take a moment to think before nodding. "Yes, I suppose she would be worried. Everything is fine. Come in and we'll talk." He stepped back into the room and closed the door after Adam had entered.

"She says you found something? A journal?" Adam asked.

Randor nodded. "Not me, personally, but a journal was found, yes. Do you remember me telling you stories of my brother, Keldor, when you were a boy?"

"Of course. You thought that he'd been twisted by magic to betray you. Afterward, you never saw him again."

"Yes, and as you know, finding out what happened to him has been a particular obsession of mine. Even though he betrayed me, he's still my brother. I've always thought that perhaps the Sorceress could help return him to the man he once was."

Adam had heard this theory many times over the years, especially around the Winter Solstice, which was now only days away. He wasn't sure why the subject of Keldor always came up around this time of year. His personal theory was that, as the Winter Solstice represented change and rebirth, the dawn of a new year simply caused his father to reflect on the past. It was a common Solstice practice among the people to look back at the past before moving forward. He just wished that his father wouldn't dwell on this particular subject so much, its having happened so long ago. This time did seem different, though, as Teela had said. This journal must have been a significant find for his father. "But whose journal

was discovered? His?”

Randor shook his head. “No, not his. It belonged to someone else, chronicling what happened to him.”

“Do you know who wrote it?”

His father’s face grew solemn. “A woman named Evelyn, but we both know her better as Evil-Lyn.”

A look of surprise crossed Adam’s face. “Evil-Lyn? That’s strange.”

His father sighed. “Not as strange as you would think. She served Keldor for a brief time, before she became the monster that she is now.”

“I never knew that,” Adam replied.

Randor shrugged slightly. “I’d only heard about it secondhand before now, myself, and didn’t know if I could believe it. According to the tales told in this book, it’s true. As far as I know, Skeletor killed or imprisoned my brother, and she now serves him. Perhaps she even betrayed Keldor for Skeletor.”

“What does the journal say happened to him?”

Randor shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve yet to finish it.”

“Then I will leave you to your work, father. Just be sure to pop your head out once in a while. You know Teela, she always thinks something is amiss.”

Randor smiled, thankful for her concern. “Usually when she thinks that, she’s right. She has good instincts. Always has. In this case, I am merely excited to finally, at least potentially, learn the truth about what happened to Keldor.”

“I understand, father. Let me know if you need anything. If so, I’ll have it brought to you right away.” Adam began to leave, but Randor quickly grasped his arm. Adam saw a look in his father’s eyes that said he was contemplating asking a question, but he couldn’t seem to bring himself to do it. “What is it, father?”

“I do need something, Adam.”

“Anything. You know that.”

There was a long moment of silence before his father spoke. “Have Evil-Lyn or Skeletor ever mentioned my brother to you?”

Adam’s brow furrowed in mock confusion. “When would they have had the opportunity?”

Randor sighed quietly as he let go of Adam's arm. "I know that I'm getting older, son, but don't think of me as a fool. I know things that I've kept secret for many years, to protect you."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Yes, you do." He paused. "I know the secret of He-Man."

Adam felt his face flush and hoped that his father did not notice. "You do? What is it?"

His father looked him deep in the eye. "I'm your father, Adam, and I know what kind of man you are. I know that you were never a coward that would run from battle. The fact that you are never around when He-Man arrives is no coincidence. More than that, there is a link between a parent and their child that cannot be easily explained. Do you really think that whenever I look into the eyes of Eternia's protector, I don't also see the eyes of my son?"

Adam's shock was so great that he had to steady himself against his father's chair. "How long have you known?"

Randor looked down briefly before meeting his son's gaze. "Longer than I care to admit, I'm afraid. I'm sorry that I was always so hard on you. You must have endured burdens that I cannot imagine, only to have a harsh father who acted as if he were disappointed in you. Know, Adam, that I was never disappointed in you. I knew you must have had your reasons, that if it were necessary for you to share your secret with me, you would have. I simply wanted to respect your privacy, and protect your secret."

Adam walked away from his father's chair and sank into a second that had long remained unused in the corner. "Forgive me, father. This is a lot for me to take in."

"I understand, and I am sorry, but my question remains. Have either of those two evil souls mentioned my brother to you, in any of your countless battles?" Taking in the sight of his father, looking unkempt and haggard, Adam could see that this was incredibly important to him.

He thought back, trying to find any instances of Keldor's name being mentioned, but he couldn't think of even one. "No. I'm afraid not."

Randor rubbed his temples in frustration and sighed. "I thought that that would be your answer. Nevertheless, I needed to ask."

"So what now?" Adam asked.

"I read more, I suppose, but before I do, could you possibly do me one more

favor?”

“Anything, father. What do you need?”

“Would you indulge an old man with the story of how you were blessed with this awesome power? I’ve longed to know for many years and now I can finally ask you. I’m sure it is an amazing tale.”

“Find me an old man to tell it to,” Adam joked.

“You know what I mean, boy,” Randor said, a smile returning to his face.

Adam smiled back. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry that I never told you, but I was sworn to secrecy by the Sorceress.”

“Does Teela know?” Randor asked.

“Yes, she does.” Adam saw a brief look of hurt upon his father’s face. “I had to deceive her for many years, as I did all of my friends, but when I asked for her hand in marriage, I told her the truth. I did not want a marriage founded on a lie.”

Randor smiled. “A wise choice.”

“However,” Adam continued, “regardless of my promise to the Sorceress, now that you know, I don’t see what it would hurt to tell you. Do you remember when the Mystic Wall crumbled and fell?”

Randor nodded solemnly. “Of course I do. It was a dark day in our history.”

“Yes, it was. And it’s also where the story begins.” Randor turned his father’s old chair away from the desk to face Adam’s. He sat down as his son began to tell him a story he’d only told once before, to his wife, Teela, just over a year ago.

■ ■ ■

Adam awoke with a start. A loud rumble shook the palace. He gripped his blankets tightly as a painting fell off of his bedroom wall and crashed to the floor. After a moment that seemed to last forever, the shaking stopped and he heard the commotion of people talking loudly outside his bedroom door. He leapt from his bed and dressed quickly, throwing on his blue trousers and white shirt before bursting into the hallway where he collided with his best friend, Teela, as he struggled to put on his boots. She grunted as he smacked into her. “Ugh! Adam,

look out!”

He struggled not to fall after their collision. “Sorry, Teela. What’s happening?”

She shook her head as he finished getting his boots on. “I don’t know, but it’s certainly gotten everyone in a tizzy.”

“Let’s find my father,” he suggested.

“Good idea. C’mon.” They began jogging toward the council chamber, where they figured King Randor would be speaking with his men. Teela was nearly three years Adam’s senior, her twentieth birthday only months away. They’d been raised together since before they could remember. No one in the kingdom, other than their parents, knew either of them as well as they knew each other. As young children, Teela had felt maternal towards him, as she often got saddled with watching over him, which she would remind him of often. As they had gotten older, she had become less of a babysitter, and more of a friend.

They did everything together, and while their parents often joked about them getting married some day, both Adam and Teela thought that the idea was patently ridiculous. They were just friends. Besides that, each one thought that the other was a huge pain in the posterior. They had more of a sibling-like relationship in that regard. They loved each other without question, but both of them also loved to torment the other. It was just how their friendship worked.

Adam knew that when he was a baby, he’d had a twin sister named Adora, but that an enemy had taken her. His parents didn’t talk about it much, but he knew the gist of what had happened. He often wondered what his life would have been like if he’d shared it with a twin sister. He always came to the conclusion that it would probably be much the same as it had been with Teela, minus the babysitting and the teasing that went with it. He would never know, of course, but that seemed the most likely answer. How the dynamic of the three of them would have worked, he wasn’t sure. Would they all have been friends, or would Teela have been friends only with Adora and not him? He figured it was silly to think of such things, but the thought of Teela not being his friend saddened him. He wasn’t sure he’d trade his friendship with her for a life with his sister, to be honest, although he would never say such a thing to his parents. It’s hard to feel emotional attachment to a sister you don’t remember, but Teela was real, and here in the now. It wasn’t really worth wondering about at all, when you got right down to it. Adam was pleased with his life and there wasn’t any sense in daydreaming about another one.

As they jogged through the palace, careful not to run into any of the other, thankfully unhurt, people in the hallways, aftershocks of the quake-like disturbance caused the building to shudder. Adam looked at his friend as she ran slightly ahead of him. Her reddish-blond hair was pulled into a braided ponytail and it

bobbed and bounced as they made their way through the palace. She had obviously been awake already, probably training, as he could see a sheen of sweat on her skin and a glow that came over her whenever she exercised. She wore her usual outfit, which consisted of a white and gold tunic, boots, forearm bracers, and bits of armor that wrapped around her upper biceps, although the latter was more for decoration than protection. Her legs were bare from the tops of her boots, which came to an end below her knees, to the tops of her thighs.

Adam couldn't help but be transfixed as her muscles flexed while she ran. Teela had been in fantastic shape since her early teens, when she had suddenly become very interested in being a warrior like her father, Duncan. She had put away the childish things of her youth and dedicated her waking hours to training. She hoped to one day become the captain of the royal guard. Adam had no doubt that she would achieve this. She had become quite the formidable warrior, and, thanks to her father, an impressive strategist as well.

Due to her dedication, Adam often felt as if she were disappointed in him. He preferred hanging around the palace and relaxing over grueling exercise and sparring. There had been no attacks of any real significance on Eternia in his lifetime and he didn't expect there to be one any time soon. He continued to train for no other reason than because he hated that feeling of disappointing her. He would never admit it to her, or anyone else, but he had become quite fond of her over the last couple of years. He wanted her to like him, but she was more dedicated to her training at this point in her life, and he respected that. He was also afraid that if he said anything, she'd reject him and that it would harm their friendship. He didn't think it was worth the risk.

Two guards keeping watch over the council chamber opened its massive doors as Adam and Teela approached. The two of them had free-reign over the palace, with few exceptions. As they rushed into the room, Adam saw his father surrounded by several members of the guard. Among them were Teela's father, Duncan, the Avionian leader, Stratos, and Ram Man, huge and powerful, but a rather simple fellow, who would do anything for his friends. When they came to a stop, Adam sucked in a breath as he noticed, to his dismay that Teela was not winded at all. As they moved closer, Adam and Teela could begin to overhear his father and the others discussing the situation.

“—don't think that such a thing can happen,” they heard Duncan saying.

Stratos shook his head. “We don't fully understand how its magic worked. We have no way to be certain without seeing for ourselves. I'll do a recon flight to find out.” Stratos was an Avionian, a humanoid being that bore similar characteristics to birds. He wore a jetpack and had wings coming out of his forearms that allowed him to fly without the need of a larger aircraft or vehicle.

Randor nodded. “Yes, my friend, I think that that would be a wise idea. We need to know more of what's happening.”

Stratos turned in their direction and nodded in greeting to the two of them. "Good morning, my friends."

"Good morning, Stratos," Teela said. Neither Teela nor Adam asked Stratos what was happening as he passed by. They knew he was in a hurry to leave.

King Randor saw them coming, but held up his hand, telling them to be patient. "We'll await Stratos's report and meet back here as soon as he returns," he told the others. The group surrounding the king separated and went about the room speaking amongst themselves, awaiting the return of their comrade. Randor turned to Adam and Teela once more and motioned for them to come closer. Duncan stayed by his side as his daughter approached with the prince.

Adam was the first to speak. "What's happening, father?"

The king tried to hide the worry in his face, but it still showed in his eyes. It was something that Adam had not often seen in his father, who was usually calm and stoic. "We don't yet know, my son. Are you and Teela alright?"

"We're fine, sire," Teela said. "I got a little knock from Adam bumping into me in the confusion, but that's about normal for him."

Adam rolled his eyes at her joke before getting to the business at hand. "What were you and your counsel talking about when we came in? Does someone have a guess as to what caused that tremor?"

His father seemed uneasy. "It's only a guess at the moment."

"Well, if it's only a guess, surely there's no harm in telling us," Teela replied.

King Randor nodded. "Yes, I suppose there is not. After all, you and Adam are more grown up than either myself or your father would like to admit. Stratos fears that the Mystic Wall has fallen."

Adam's eyes widened. "How could that be? I thought that it could never be destroyed?"

"So did we, but we'll know for sure when Stratos returns."

No more than moments after he said it, it happened, as the Avionian rushed back into the room, shouting loud enough to make sure all present could hear him. "It's down! The Mystic Wall has fallen!"

Adam glanced quickly toward his father. "What do we do?"

"We prepare for the worst." Randor turned to his friend Duncan, who was already at attention, ready for a fight.

Duncan gave the king a look that said he already knew his orders. They'd spent so much time in battle together as young men that they seldom had to speak to know what the other was thinking. The Eternian Man-At-Arms called out to the other warriors in the room. "Battle positions!"

Adam raised his eyebrows in confusion. "A battle? But who would attack Eternos Pala—" A large explosion rocked the room and Teela fell, with Adam landing on top of her in a heap.

"Ugh! Get off!" she grunted.

"Sorry!" He jumped back to his feet and reached out his hand to help her up. She took it and once she had regained her footing Adam's father grasped his arm.

"You and Teela need to get out of here, Adam. Find your mother."

Teela protested. "But I can fight!"

Randor shook his head. "And you most likely will, my dear, but please, for the sake of two fathers, you both need to leave this place at once."

Adam shot a look at Teela, who shared his frustration. She nodded in acknowledgement and the two of them ran from the room to find his mother, Marlena.

As they entered the hallway, the air was thick with dust from the explosion. Adam and Teela covered their mouths and stayed low, where the dust had not yet settled. They held their breath while they made the short trip to the hallway that led to his mother's quarters. Upon reaching the doorway, they entered and began to ascend the spiral staircase. They knocked on the door at the top of the steps. "Mother? It's me, Adam, and I have Teela with me."

The door opened and Marlena pulled them both into her arms. "Thank the goddess you're safe!"

Adam struggled to speak from within his mother's clutching arms. "I was about to say the same thing!"

"I'm fine." She let them go. "I had gone out to see if anyone needed any help, but thankfully none were hurt. I've only just returned on orders from your father. He was dreadfully worried. Do we know yet what caused those tremors? What has happened?"

Teela was the first to speak. "The Mystic Wall has fallen."

The queen staggered back, in shock. "What? How?"

Adam shrugged. "We don't know, but Stratos has confirmed that it's happened."

The queen's face paled. "This is terrible news."

"Why?" Adam asked. "Surely this Skeletor creature the wall was built for can't still be alive. Seventeen years is a long time to live on the Dark Hemisphere."

Queen Marlana paced the room. "I wouldn't put anything past Skeletor, Adam."

Teela nodded in agreement. "Besides that, Adam, what do you think caused that explosion? That wasn't part of any quake."

Marlana stopped suddenly, turning to face them. "Explosion? What explosion?"

"An explosion rocked the council chamber right before we left," Teela answered. "That's why the king sent us to you."

"My gods, I had felt that, but I thought it was from the quake. Is Randor alright?"

"Yes, everyone's fine at the moment," Adam said. "But we need to get back there."

Teela shook her head. "You heard what your father said, Adam. We need to stay here with your mother."

"On the contrary-" All three were startled by the sound of Duncan's voice coming from the doorway. "I need Adam to come with me."

6.

THE SWORD OF LIGHT

Still stunned by Duncan's sudden appearance, Prince Adam didn't understand why the Man-At-Arms wanted him specifically. "What? Me? What for?" Adam asked.

Duncan motioned for Adam to follow him. "I'll tell you on the way. Teela, stay here and protect the queen." He handed Teela her sword, which he'd brought with him.

Teela glanced down at her weapon as she took it, but quickly shot her father a look of both confusion and disappointment. "Why are you taking Adam, father? You know I can fight."

Duncan gripped her shoulder gently, knowing his daughter felt a driving need within herself to be a warrior and to help in the battle. "Which is exactly why I need you here, protecting Queen Marlana. Adam has a different task ahead of him." As he let go, he could see in her eyes that she understood, even if she didn't like it.

Marlana reached for Duncan, placing her hand on his arm, concernedly. "Why do you need Adam, Duncan?"

The Eternian Man-At-Arms hesitated. "I cannot say, my queen. I must simply ask that you trust me."

She removed her hand, but with trepidation. "You know I do, old friend."

Duncan nodded in thanks and motioned to Adam. "C'mon, son. We don't have much time."

Adam's face gave away his frustration. "Don't I get a say in the matter?"

Duncan shook his head. "Not this time, I'm afraid. Let's go."

Adam said goodbye to Teela and his mother before they hurried out of the queen's quarters and made their way back down the long spiral staircase. "What's this all about, Duncan?" Adam asked.

"I don't truly know, myself, Adam. All I know is that the Sorceress has asked for you."

Adam shot Duncan a puzzled expression. He knew that the Sorceress was a taboo topic in the palace. He'd heard about her from friends, but any mention of her was met with a cold stare from his father. "I've heard rumors. Who is the Sorceress?"

"You'll find out shortly."

"Why aren't you with my father? Has something happened?"

Duncan stopped and looked Adam in the eye, his voice taking on an even more serious tone. "Your father has been taken, Adam. By Skeletor. Now listen, we don't have much time. The Sorceress told me in a vision that I am to bring you to her, and that's all I know. I've known the Sorceress for many years and if she says I'm to bring you, then I'm going to bring you. She knows your father, as well, and she knows the situation he's in. I can only assume that asking for you fits into her plans to help King Randor."

Adam's voice raised in pitch as he panicked. "You saw her in a vision? Duncan, no offense, but you're sounding crazy."

Duncan sighed, exasperated with the young man. Adam meant well, but Duncan would be lying if he said that the prince didn't grate on his nerves from time to time. "You know that I'm not, Adam. You have to trust me. Please."

Adam shrugged. "OK, but I don't see how any of this is going to help my father. We should be going after them!"

Duncan shook his head. "The Royal Guard is already in pursuit. That

sorcerer and his forces won't get far. If I know Skeletor, your father won't be in any real danger from him until he's finished gloating about however he managed to destroy the Mystic Wall. And because I do have some experience with him, I know that that will take some time." They began moving again and made their way outside of the palace to a Wind Raider, a flying craft of Duncan's design. Lying on the seat of the craft was a green tiger, in a deep sleep. "That cat is always getting in here. I don't understand it," Duncan growled.

"Cringer can take a nap just about anywhere." Adam reached down and pet his friend behind the ears, waking the large cat. "C'mon, boy, you've got to move." Cringer sat up and padded to the far edge of the seat before lying back down. It wasn't much of an effort, but it left enough room for Adam and Duncan to enter the craft and sit down.

"We'll just have to take him with us," Duncan said. "We don't have time for his shenanigans." The Wind Raider lifted off of the ground and began speeding in the direction of the Dark Hemisphere.

Adam looked at the older man, still confused by what was happening. "Who is this Sorceress, Duncan? Why has she been kept a secret from me?"

Duncan looked straight ahead as he spoke, steering the Wind Raider away from the palace. "Your father had a bit of a falling out with her when you were just a babe. She's kind and gentle, a soul whose only purpose is the protection of life."

This perplexed Adam. "How did they have a falling out? She seems like the kind of person my father would be friends with."

"They were, once. It was actually the building of the Mystic Wall itself that drove a wedge between them, at least in your father's eyes. The truth is that she never stopped caring about your father or Eternia, but she respects his decisions, and he decided to end their friendship."

"Why?"

Duncan sighed as he pushed the vehicle to the limits of its speed. "Your father was stubborn in his younger days, but more than that, it was shortly after your sister was taken. He wasn't exactly of sound mind back then, if you don't mind my saying it, and revenge filled his heart. I feel that he regrets his decision, but that stubbornness I spoke of hasn't fully gone away."

Adam peered ahead, trying to ascertain their destination. "But you still haven't told me where we're going."

Duncan pointed in the direction of the Dark Hemisphere, its dark clouded sky quickly filling the horizon. "Castle Grayskull."

Adam's raised his eyebrow. "Castle Grayskull? That old place? I thought it had been deserted for centuries?"

"It is deserted," Duncan paused, "except for the Sorceress. She guards its power. It's a duty that she has sacrificed much to uphold."

"What power?" Adam asked. "It's just a crumbling old castle."

Duncan threw him a quick glance. "You know better than to judge a book by its cover, Adam. Grayskull holds more power than you can imagine. Even I don't fully understand it. Before you were born, your father was sworn to protect it, as was his father before him. Eternia has long been watchful over Castle Grayskull. That alliance eroded when your father turned his back on it."

"That doesn't sound like my father."

Duncan shook his head. "Not now, no. Like I said, your father was a different man back then. We all were, to be honest." As he spoke, Castle Grayskull began to creep up on the horizon, a desolate place that Adam had heard of since he had been a child, but had never seen until now, despite its proximity to the palace. Going near Grayskull was expressly forbidden.

Adam had honestly never been that interested in it anyway. As he'd said, he simply thought of it as a crumbling old castle. Despite this, as they approached, he couldn't help but feel a shiver run down his spine after hearing Duncan's story. If Eternia had been sworn to protect this place, he could only imagine that it was important. Why had his father not upheld that oath? Adam supposed that Duncan was right, and that he must have been very different then, as he could scarcely imagine his father doing such a thing. Although, seeing the castle now, it certainly didn't look like the kind of place that needed protecting. The large skull-like visage of the castle itself was impressive and seemed intimidating enough on its own.

The Wind Raider flew low to the ground on its approach to the old structure and stopped only yards from the massive jaw-like drawbridge that was slowly lowering to greet them... or eat them. It had the appearance of a massive mouth ready to devour any who dared enter and Adam wasn't so sure that he wanted to go inside. He glanced at Duncan as they climbed out of the vehicle, a now fully alert Cringer in tow. "Have you ever, um, been inside of that thing?" Adam asked.

Duncan nodded. "Once. But that was many years ago." The man who was like an uncle to him began making his way to the now fully lowered bridge before looking back at Adam and his pet. "There's nothing to be afraid of. C'mon."

"Afraid? We're not afraid, are we, boy?" He looked at Cringer, who was trembling. Adam tried to put on a brave face as he began to follow Duncan into the castle. Cringer came along as well, the large Eternian tiger apparently more afraid of staying behind, alone with the vehicle, than entering the foreboding

structure. As the three of them entered the massive stone ruin, Adam once again felt a chill creep down his spine. He couldn't help but be a little afraid of this place. Since he was a child, he'd often heard stories of the castle being haunted. The bright ball of light that approached him and his companions did nothing to dissuade that fear. He froze as it hovered not ten feet in front of them. After a moment, the strange apparition shimmered and began to shift in his vision. The brightness of it caused him to close his eyes, and when he opened them, he was stunned to see a woman standing before him.

She was beautiful, appearing to be not much older than Teela, whom she slightly resembled. She wore a gown of shimmering white with silver armor covering it and her legs were mostly bare with the exception of white boots. Her arms were covered with tight white sleeves and an elaborate feathered headdress sat upon her head. As he looked down from it to her face once more, she smiled at him. Her smile seemed to take over her entire face, her eyes lighting up along with it. She even had the same dimples as his friend did when she smiled, usually after she'd bested him in sparring practice. Despite this seeming familiarity, he almost jumped when the woman spoke, despite her voice's quiet, almost timid quality. "Greetings, Prince Adam."

He felt like he was about to say something stupid when his court training kicked in. "Greetings, Sorceress." His voice sounded weak and scared, despite his efforts to the contrary.

"Do not be afraid, Child. I am a friend." She smiled again, and he felt his nerves relax, if only a little. He thought it odd that she referred to him as "child" as she didn't seem to be much older than he was. Adam had a feeling that there was a lot more to this strange woman than her appearance would have one believe.

"Sorry. I'm just a little nervous as I don't understand why I'm here," he said.

She nodded. "I understand. It is a shame we have not met before. I would have liked to have watched you grow."

Adam swept his eyes about the room, taking in the castle as well as he could. He didn't see anything special about it. "So why am I here, if you don't mind my asking?"

"You are here to fulfill a prophecy," she answered.

"A prophecy?" He turned to Duncan and whispered. "She's kidding, right?"

Duncan stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "I honestly don't know, Adam. All I know is that I was to bring you here."

The Sorceress stepped toward Adam, prompting Cringer to hide behind his legs. She knelt down and began to gently rub the tiger behind the ears, causing

him to come out from behind Adam and purr loudly. "Yes, Adam. A prophecy." She stood up and looked him in the eyes. "In times of great darkness, a hero will emerge to combat evil with the light of goodness. As you now know, darkness is upon us. Skeletor has escaped the Dark Hemisphere along with his witch Evil-Lyn and new adversaries that he has gathered in his exile. He will stop at nothing to take what he wants."

"What does he want?" Adam asked.

The calm look on her face changed, intensifying. "Everything. There is no satisfying him."

Adam stole a glance at Duncan briefly before returning his eyes to the Sorceress. "So who is this hero that's supposed to stop him, or the darkness or whatever?"

She smiled at him knowingly. "You, Adam. You, the heir of D'Vann Grayskull."

"D'Vann who? Excuse my saying so, Sorceress, but I'm no hero."

"I know in my heart that you have that hero inside of you, Adam. It merely has to be allowed to surface."

He turned to Duncan once more. "Darkness and light? Me? A hero? You can't be buying this, Duncan."

His friend placed his hands on his hips. "I have no reason not to. The Sorceress has never lied to me before. Like her, I know that you have the potential, even if you don't see it."

The Sorceress motioned for them to follow her. "Come with me and I will explain." They began to follow her deeper into the castle, which Adam suddenly realized seemed oddly larger on the inside than the outside would lead you to believe. He wondered if there was also magic at work with that, giving the castle more space inside than should be possible. Magic. Crazy. His father had long ago shunned magic, something to do with Adam's uncle Keldor, he suspected. He didn't know much about his uncle Keldor, but he knew that magic was somehow involved and since whatever the incident was that had happened between Keldor and Randor, his father had cracked down on the use of it within Eternia. His father thought that while not all magic was poison, enough of it was dangerous to make no magic worth the risk.

As they walked, the Sorceress began to speak, as if answering his thoughts. "Magic is a powerful force that can be used for great good, but also for great evil. Eons ago, a powerful sorcerer tried to use it to claim all of Tellus, as he had other worlds, but his hubris was greater than his control of his spell. It caused the Dark

Hemisphere to be formed and the balance between the light and the dark on Tellus was lost.”

“Light and dark? You mean good and evil?” Adam asked.

She shook her head. “No. I mean light and dark. The terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are too limited to properly describe what I speak of. Light can mean good, but it can also mean innocence and with it, a dangerous naivety. Darkness can mean evil, but with it, the necessary counterbalance that causes a forest to grow once more after burning to cinders, to bring rebirth from what once was death. You mustn’t think merely in terms of good or evil, or you will never understand, Adam.”

“I guess.”

She continued. “Once this sorcerer was defeated, the sword of King Grayskull, called the Sword of Power, which was a conduit for Grayskull’s power, was split, much like all of Tellus, into two halves. One of light and one of darkness.”

“Grayskull’s power? You mean D’Vann’s, or this castle?”

The Sorceress smiled, pleased to see that the prince was listening. “One and the same, Prince Adam. King Grayskull possessed great power, and used it to defend this castle, once his, from the forces of evil who would try to claim it. Seated within the heart of this place is power untold. Even I cannot describe to you what it would mean for an evil force to wield it. A force like this in the hands of someone like Skeletor, not only an agent of darkness, but of evil as well, would mean doom for Tellus, and indeed the entire universe.”

“The entire universe? Really?” Adam was trying to be cordial, but he found this story difficult to believe.

“Indeed. Eternia’s enemy, Skeletor, already possesses the Sword of Darkness. Evil-Lyn, who was once loyal to Castle Grayskull, aided him and allowed him to take it from a defeated foe.” She paused. “Your uncle.”

Adam’s eyes bulged. “Keldor?”

“Yes. The Sword of Darkness is powerful, Adam. No weapon in the Eternian armory can match its power. With a sorcerer as powerful as Skeletor wielding it, the times of darkness are surely upon us.”

“But I thought you said the darkness wasn’t evil?” he asked.

“Yes, but Skeletor is, and he twists it to his will. That is why you are here.” She led Adam and Duncan into a massive room deep in heart of Grayskull. Bright balls of light whirled around them, resembling smaller versions of the one that the Sorceress had appeared as when they first arrived. A great chasm dropped off

into seeming nothingness at the edge of where they stood. With a gesture from the Sorceress, an ornate chest flew up from the darkness below and hovered in front of her. As she opened it, Adam saw a brilliant silver sword within it. It reflected the balls of light around them, which had grown brighter and seemingly more excited as the sword had come closer to them. "It is once again time for a champion of the light."

Adam stepped back respectfully to allow Duncan to take the sword. The older man gently grabbed him by the shoulders and put him back in place in front of the weapon. "Who? Me?" Adam asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, Adam," she answered. "Only an heir of Grayskull can tap the power of the Sword of Light and become its champion, called He-Man. It can only be you."

"What about my father? If I'm an heir, he must be too, right?"

"Your father's days of adventure are over, Adam. Besides that fact, you are the one the prophecy spoke of. A twin, born in the bloodline of Grayskull. One would shine in the light while the other would fall to the darkness."

A look of realization crossed Adam's face as he heard her words. "Adora? You're speaking of my sister Adora?"

"Yes. She was taken by a dark force, as you know, when you were only a babe. You, however, were raised in a time of peace and hope. You are the one the prophecy spoke of. Take the sword, Adam."

Adam stepped back. "I don't know," he paused. "This is too much. Duncan?"

Duncan shot Adam a stern look. "Your father's life hangs in the balance, Adam. I fear that we don't have the time for doubt. This is a great gift the fates have bestowed upon you. Do not be selfish or afraid. If the Sorceress is right, we all will depend upon you. Your people need you to do this. Your father needs you to do this."

Adam knew that he should be brave and take the sword, but instead he felt a surge of panic, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. "I don't know if I can do it. How can I be this hero? I'm just a dumb kid." He felt frozen to where he stood.

The Sorceress placed her left arm around his shoulders, the friendly embrace surprising him. "Do not be afraid, Adam, for you will not be alone in your journey. Man-At-Arms will know your secret, as will I, and I will always be here for you, to counsel you when it is needed."

She seemed so warm and friendly, almost like a mother in many ways. “Do you promise?”

Her eyes sparkled as she smiled. “Of course.”

Forcing his feet to move despite his fear, he slowly approached the floating chest and reached inside, pulling out the sword. Nothing happened. “Am I supposed to feel something?”

“Not yet,” she said, amused. “The sword is magic, and requires a spell to grant you the power. Before you use it, remember, none must know your secret, save for those that are here. If the forces of evil were to learn He-Man’s identity, it could have grave consequences for those you love.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“Then raise the sword aloft, Adam, and say the words, ‘by the power of Grayskull.’”

With a shaky right hand, he did as she said, raising the sword high above his head. “By the power of Grayskull!” Without warning, he felt as if lightning had struck the sword. The shock traveled down his arm and he felt his entire body vibrate. A bright light shone from within him, much like when the Sorceress transformed before his eyes not long before, and when the light faded he looked down to see his body transformed. For one thing, he noticed as he turned around that he was taller, now standing several inches over Duncan, who he normally had to look up to. His body was covered with muscles as if he’d spent his whole life training harder than anyone Adam had ever known. He wore a loincloth made of animal fur and across his nearly bare chest he could feel the tight harness that now wrapped around to his back. He held the sword near his chest in both hands. Duncan looked at him with shock in his eyes. “I have the power,” Adam said, his voice startling him as it sounded much older and deeper.

His transformation finished, he pointed the Sword of Light in front of him to admire it, but before he knew what was happening, a bright blast of energy shot out and enveloped Cringer, who yelped in surprise before growing as large as a horse. When the light faded, Cringer now stood in front of him in a saddle and helmet of red armor. This new beast roared with a ferocity that he could scarcely imagine coming from his beloved pet.

He looked toward Duncan and the Sorceress. “What happened?”

The Sorceress’s eyes widened, impressed herself with the transformation. “You have become He-Man, warrior of the light. Cringer is now Battle Cat, your loyal ally and mount. Cringer’s transformation was unexpected but not surprising, given that King Grayskull had a mount like this in his era. I did not foresee the power transferring to your pet in this way, but I have to admit, I was not entirely

sure of the effects the sword would have.”

Adam’s eyes lowered to his left hand, massive now compared to before. He could feel a tremendous amount of power surging through him. “You could have told me that before.”

“This is new to me as well, Prince Adam.”

“Amazing,” was all Duncan could manage to say.

Adam stared at the Sword of Light clutched in his hand and thought back to his childhood fantasies of fighting evil, running through the courtyard with Teela, wooden training swords in their hands. “You know, I’ve always felt like I was destined for something. I never said anything about it because I felt it was silly. I mean, what was I but a foolhardy prince? But now this, I mean, for this to be my destiny...” he trailed off.

The Sorceress shook her head. “No, Adam. This is only a part of your destiny, a step toward your true purpose.”

He raised his eyebrows curiously. “What purpose?”

“In time, Adam. In time.”

“OK.” As he looked down at his new form once more, a thought crossed his mind, causing him to panic slightly. “Can I turn back?”

“Of course. You simply need to speak the words, ‘let the power return,’ and you will be as you once were. For now, though, you must use your newfound power to defeat Skeletor and save your father.”

Being reminded that his father was in danger snapped him out of the daze he was in. So much was happening in such a short time. He had to clear his head before looking at the Sorceress and Duncan. “You’re right. Let’s go.” Battle Cat approached him and knelt down, allowing him to climb atop his pet’s massive saddle. “I’ll be back someday, Sorceress. I have so many questions.”

The Sorceress nodded in agreement. “I know, and I will tell you all I know, when the time is right. For now, good journey. May the goddess be with you.”

“And you as well, Sorceress.” He glanced at Duncan. “Ready?”

Teela’s father stroked his thick mustache before nodding. “As I’ll ever be. This is truly amazing.”

“I know.” A smile crossed Adam’s face before a calm determination settled in its place. “Let’s go, my father needs me.”

“Of course.” Duncan said.

He-Man and Duncan made their way back to the Wind Raider, the older man jumping into the cockpit and speeding off in the direction of the Dark Hemisphere. He-Man looked back at Grayskull to see the Sorceress give him a parting wave as the massive jaw bridge began to close. “C’mon, Battle Cat!” The massive cat turned and ran in the direction that the Wind Raider had headed, quickly catching up with the vehicle before passing it in an impressive feat of speed.

■ ■ ■

“Outstanding!” Randor couldn’t help but show his excitement as his son, now king of Eternia, told his story. The fact that Randor’s childhood friend and trusted ally Duncan was also aware of his son’s secret was not lost on him, but the former king bore no grudge. Without Duncan answering the Sorceress’s call, the kingdom would have been lost to Skeletor long ago. “I feel like such a fool for abandoning Castle Grayskull in my youth. If only I had known...” he trailed off.

Adam gave his father a reassuring look. “You didn’t know. As far as you ever knew, the power of Grayskull was just a myth.”

Randor sighed. “I have several regrets, Adam, and that one is near the top of the list. Please, though, go on and finish your tale. It will be interesting to hear of your first meeting with Skeletor. I was there, of course, but to hear it from your perspective should be quite enlightening.”

“Indeed. You’ll learn just how frightened I was,” Adam said, laughing nervously before he began once more.

7.

THE RESCUE

It wasn't long before He-Man came upon the battle between Skeletor's forces and King Randor's men. Taking place among the barren soil and rock formations that neared the border of the Dark Hemisphere, dust clouds had formed amidst the chaos. Stratos and Ram-Man were dealing with a yellow-skinned sorceress who Adam assumed must be Evil-Lyn. The two warriors were doing their best, but couldn't even get close to her, as her powerful spells blasted them away. A large beast-like man swung one of the royal guards as a weapon, knocking him into another before ripping the guards' arms from their sockets. He-Man gasped as he witnessed the creature's savagery. In his peripheral vision he saw another of his father's warriors, known as Mekaneck, fighting with a swordsman with three robotic eyes that swiveled from one to the other upon a mechanical device implanted in the man's head. The man was well trained in swordplay and was giving Mekaneck a run for his money as he defended himself with his large mace.

It was what was in front of He-Man that startled him the most. His best friend, Teela, was fighting a Gar cyborg with a massive metal lower jaw and a mechanical right arm that whirred and transformed from a claw to a laser gun as he approached. As a powerful laser bolt shot out from the cyborg's appendage, Battle Cat leapt into its line of fire. He-Man swept the Sword of Light to the left,

blocking the deadly blast. He heard her yelp in surprise as Battle Cat came to a skidding stop before running back at the cyborg, knocking him aside with a massive paw.

“Thanks, whoever you are!” He heard her shout in his direction.

She was supposed to be protecting his mother. What was she doing here? He realized, almost too late, that he couldn't ask her due to the risk of giving away his identity. Instead he merely greeted her, nodding in her direction before turning his attention toward the man with three eyes, who had knocked the warrior Mekanek to the ground.

Skeletor's ally spun his mechanical apparatus to a new eye, which fired a laser bolt toward Mekanek. He-Man could not reach his friend in time and instead threw the Sword of Light in a spinning motion to intercept the bolt. Not only did he succeed, but the blast bounced back at the evil warrior, striking him in the weaponized eye. It sizzled and sparks flew from the tri-optic visor before it spun to a different optic lens. The warrior grunted in pain. “You'll pay for that!” As he spoke, he reached behind his back and withdrew a dirk, throwing the small knife almost faster than He-Man's eyes could track the weapon.

He-Man dodged to the left as the dirk swished past his ear. He caught the Sword of Light in his left hand at the same moment as the sword magically flew back toward him. The small knife ricocheted off of an outcropping of rock, piercing He-Man in the rear of his left shoulder. He cried out suddenly as it struck him, but reached back with his right hand and removed it, throwing it back at its owner. He could feel a warm trickle of blood flow down his left side from the wound, but it seemed to heal rather quickly in his new form. Despite not being nearly as experienced with throwing knives as his opponent, the bladed weapon flew directly toward the warrior's face before being deftly caught in the man's hand.

“Nice throw,” the man sneered as he placed the dirk back within it. “But I'm not a bad swordsman, either.” He spun his long, barbed-ended sword in an elaborate display. “Name's Tri-Klops,” he smiled. “Pleased to meet you.” He-Man turned Battle Cat towards Tri-Klops and rushed toward him, swinging the Sword of Light as he did so. Tri-Klops easily dodged the blow before he grabbed He-Man's left arm as he passed and used it to swing himself onto Battle Cat's saddle behind him. He-Man felt Tri-Klops's right arm wrap around his throat and squeeze tightly, still holding his sword. The man's voice hissed in his ear. “Just because I'm fancy with a blade doesn't mean I need it to kill you.”

He-Man coughed as he felt the pressure on his throat increase. He thrust his head back violently into Tri-Klops's tri-optic visor and his assailant's grip loosened instantly. “Sorry, Tri-Klops, but there aren't any passengers allowed!” Battle Cat turned to the right suddenly, and without anything to hold on to, his opponent tumbled off of He-Man's mount at nearly top speed, rolling on the barren dirt behind them, stirring up a cloud of dust in his wake.

Turning back to the battle, He-Man saw Evil-Lyn and Teela fighting furiously. Somehow Teela had gotten past her spells. From the unconscious bodies of Stratos and Ram Man nearby, he guessed that they had taken the brunt of her magic. Although he was concerned for his friends, he couldn't help but be impressed that this evil sorceress had defeated two such worthy warriors. She was powerful, indeed. This made him afraid that his friend Teela was out of her depth. At the moment the thought entered his mind, the yellow-skinned sorceress swept Teela's feet out from under her, showing a surprising amount of fighting skill for a magic-user. She was well rounded in her training, to say the least. He pushed Battle Cat to top speed as they headed toward the battle.

She began to level her staff at Teela for a magical blast, but He-Man launched himself from his mount before she could attack. Sailing through the air, he collided into Evil-Lyn as he descended and tackled her to the ground. She grunted as she impacted the hard dirt with He-Man on top of her, the air driven from her lungs. Her armor protected her enough to keep her conscious, but she was out of the fight. As he rose up onto his hands, she looked up at him with bulging eyes of recognition, as if she'd seen him before. Evil-Lyn tried to speak as he stood up, but could only wheeze while she fought to get her breath back. He-Man's eyes lowered to the woman lying in the dirt and he gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry," he said. "I wouldn't hit a woman, but landing on one seemed fair enough."

"Thanks again," Teela said from behind him as she regained her own footing. She shot him a curious look, but he could sense that there was caution behind it as well. "Who are you?"

After mounting Battle Cat once more, he approached his childhood companion, who was none-the-wiser as to his true identity. He was startled to see that she appeared to be giving him a once over, and was in fact, boldly and unashamedly ogling him in his new form. He'd never seen her look at him in such a way before, and although he knew it was He-Man she was admiring and not Prince Adam, it was something he felt he could get used to. The thought made him smile. Taking a quick glance around the battlefield, he saw that the giant beast-like man was still fighting the Royal Guard, with Mekaneck joining in against him and the recovered Gar cyborg with the iron jaw. With a start, he noticed for the first time that both his father and Skeletor were nowhere to be found. "I am He-Man. A friend. Quickly, where is the king?"

"Skeletor took him! We were trying to catch up with him, but his forces have kept us occupied here."

He searched the battlefield with his eyes for any trace of them. "Which direction were they headed in?"

She pointed toward the Dark Hemisphere, which loomed in the distance. "That way!"

“Thanks!” He turned Battle Cat around and they sped off away from the battle. He had a moment of doubt about leaving his friends, but as soon as it entered his mind, Man-At-Arms arrived on his Wind Raider and began firing at Skeletor’s warriors. He saw Duncan pick up Teela in the flying vehicle and he imagined that they were having a rather spirited discussion as to why she was here amidst the battle instead of at the palace with the queen. Adam was sure he’d get filled in on their talk later. He hoped that his mother was alright, but he knew for certain his father was in very real danger. He had to focus on that first.

■ ■ ■

“It’s been a long time, Randor.” Skeletor stepped slowly around the king, who lay sprawled on the ground, far enough from the main battle to be out of sight. He wore the same attire he’d had when he’d first invaded Eternia with Hordak, minus the flowing cape. At some point, he’d removed the hood and had it attached directly to his leather armor. He still made for an intimidating sight: the face of death staring out from the darkness of the hood, the black leather armor imposing and sinister. Nearing the more volcanic terrain of the dark side of the planet, they were practically on the border between the two hemispheres. Pieces of the fallen Mystic Wall surrounded them, the once great barrier now nothing but rocks and dust.

“Not long enough, if you ask me,” Randor grunted.

Skeletor laughed, his raspy cackle a sound that the Eternian King had hoped never to hear again. “Still feisty as ever, I see.”

“How did you do it, Skeletor? How did you breach the wall?” Randor asked.

“Breach it?” The cackle again. “Look at the rubble around you.” He spread his arms wide, indicating the piles of rocks that surrounded them. “I utterly destroyed it! My power has grown tenfold since we last met, not far from this very spot. I owe much of it to my own studies and perseverance, but I also admit that I owe a bit of it to this.” He raised a long staff in front of him. The head of the staff was shaped like the skull of a ram, and it glowed with intense power. “The Havok Staff, they call it. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?” After hearing no response, he continued, “It’s an old Zalesian artifact that holds great power. You could say that it’s on loan, as it were, from a certain faceless individual. My already formidable power, combined with this staff, was more than enough to destroy your cursed Mystic Wall. I have to admit, it wouldn’t have been nearly as easy if you hadn’t abandoned the Sorceress and her little castle.” He laughed grimly.

Randor’s eyes widened in shock as he raised his head to face the skull-

faced sorcerer.

“Oh yes, I heard about your little falling out,” Skeletor continued. “What? Did you really think that I didn’t have spies on your side of the wall? Just because I couldn’t cross it physically doesn’t mean my magic was so limited that I couldn’t communicate with them. I’ve had eyes on you and your family for years now, dear King. Speaking of which, how are your wife and son?” He squatted down and put his skull within a foot of Randor’s face. “I haven’t seen young Prince Adam at all today. You didn’t lose that child too, did you?”

Anger swept over Randor and he leaned back, kicking out hard with his leg. The blow struck Skeletor in the side of the knee, toppling him over. Randor glared at his old enemy as he regained his footing and composure. “Mention my family again, and I’ll kill you.”

Skeletor laughed as he stood up and nonchalantly brushed off the dust he’d picked up in the fall. “That’s not likely. I’m already dead, in some ways.” He laughed again, which Randor was beginning to find less frightening than annoying.

Randor pulled his sword from its sheath. “I can still try. Dead or not, I’d like to see you fight without a head.”

Skeletor’s skull tilted to the side within his hood, giving him the appearance of a puzzled animal. “Really?” He shrugged his shoulders and removed the Sword of Darkness from its harness on his back. “You didn’t think I’d lost this sometime in my absence, did you?”

Randor looked upon the sword that had once belonged to his brother and fought back feelings he had not allowed himself to feel for many years. Betrayal. Loss. Anger. Sorrow. They all mixed in a cocktail of emotions that caused his hand to shake almost imperceptibly.

Skeletor opened his jaw slightly, his closest approximation to a smile. “No, I didn’t think you did.” The sword began to glow a purplish hue and Skeletor struck. Upon parrying the blow, the blade of Randor’s sword shattered into pieces. “And now,” Skeletor said, relishing the moment, “finally, it’s time for you to die.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” Randor and his attacker both turned in surprise as a muscle-bound man leapt off of a giant Eternian tiger and collided with Skeletor, bringing him to the ground with a hard impact.

The sorcerer kicked his attacker off of him and quickly found his feet once more. “And who, pray tell, dares rob me of this long awaited moment?”

“I am He-Man, and you’ll just have to keep waiting.” Adam tried to sound as brave as possible in this new form, but inside he felt like he was shaking from head to toe. He hoped that it didn’t show. He risked a quick glance toward his

father, who seemed to be all in once piece. He'd heard most of his father's conversation with Skeletor while he'd approached and he was glad to have arrived when he did.

"He-Man, eh? I think you're trying too hard." He spread his arms wide, the Sword of Darkness in his right hand, the Havok Staff in his left, and took a bow. "I am Skeletor, Lord of Destruction. While it's been nice meeting you, you're ruining what I'd always dreamed would be a rather personal moment, so..." he trailed off before quickly bringing his two weapons together, creating a massive blast that stuck He-Man in the chest, sending him flying nearly fifty yards before his body skidded across the barren ground. The skull-faced creature turned back to Randor, once again opening his jaw in that mock smile. "Now," he continued, "where were we?" He raised the Sword of Darkness over his head and slashed it toward Randor in a downward strike before having it intercepted by He-Man's own sword.

For the first time in all of history, the male and female halves of the Power Sword clashed, a shower of sparks filling the air along with a slight burning smell that accompanied it. The power of the impact caused both He-Man and Skeletor to stumble backward. Skeletor looked He-Man in the eyes and glowered. "You're back fast." Skeletor caught sight of the weapon clutched in He-Man's fist and he stared at it lustily. "The Sword of Light."

Skeletor swung his sword at He-Man in a downward motion, but He-Man blocked it, striking back with the Sword of Light as both weapons glowed with power. Skeletor parried He-Man's attack with the Havok Staff and struck with his own sword, aiming for He-Man's chest, but missed as his opponent blocked the blow with his wrist bracer. The two warriors battled for what felt like hours but was only minutes of real time, both evenly matched and neither gaining the upper hand for long.

After the battle raged on with little advantage to either warrior, Skeletor kicked He-Man square in the chest, knocking him backward. The sorcerer glanced to his left quickly and his empty eye sockets blazed with a magical fire as he launched himself in the air away from He-Man. He leaned into a back flip that landed him on the saddle of a giant dylinx cat that ran in seemingly out of nowhere before turning and leaving the scene of the battle. The fiery-eyed look must have called it somehow. Battle Cat growled furiously and arched his back at the sight of the rival beast, one of the green tiger's natural predators in the wild, and looked to give chase before He-Man told his friend to stand down. "It's OK, big guy," he said, patting the cat's side firmly. "I'm sure we'll meet again. For now, the king is safe."

Randor approached his savior. "Thanks to you. I'm very impressed that you managed to fight Skeletor to a standstill. He's an incredibly powerful warrior. You said you are called 'He-Man?'"

“Yes.”

A moment later, Duncan and Teela arrived in the Wind Raider. “Randor, are you alright?!” Duncan shouted while he stopped the vehicle.

Randor smiled at the sight of his friend. “Yes, thanks to He-Man.”

Teela stepped down from the Wind Raider and walked up to them. She raised her eyes to He-Man and smiled. “Thank you again for helping me.”

King Randor’s eyes leveled on Teela and her smile quickly faded. “Teela, you and Adam were supposed to be with Queen Marlena. Why are you here?”

Duncan spoke up for her. “Adam is back at the Palace and Teela assures me that the Queen is in good hands with the Royal Guard. That being said, we’ve already discussed her impetuosity.”

The king shot Teela a look of disappointment. “It’s more than impetuosity, Teela. You disobeyed me. You had specific orders.”

“I’m sorry, Sire, but once you were taken, Skeletor’s forces left. I knew the queen was safe, and I feared for your own safety, and also that of my father’s. I left to join the fight. I know I shouldn’t have, but my heart told me it was the right thing to do.”

“Queen Marlena’s life means more to me than my own, Teela. I’m disappointed that you would make such a rash decision. I thought you knew better.”

Teela felt tears well in her eyes as she felt embarrassment at her poor choice. King Randor clasped her shoulders in his hands before pulling her in for a hug. “But never mind that, now. I’m just glad you’re safe. You are as dear to me as my own son.”

He let go and she blushed, not wanting to look like a child in front of He-Man. “Thank you, Sire.”

“What happened to Skeletor’s forces, Duncan?” Randor asked.

“When He-Man arrived, he wore down their resolve. Not long after, when I arrived in the Wind Raider, they fled. That’s when we came here.”

Randor turned to their new ally and smiled. “Come back with us, He-Man. I’d love for my wife and son to meet the man who saved my life.”

Adam, in his new form, couldn’t help but squirm slightly. “Thank you, King Randor, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline, this time.” He mounted Battle Cat once

more. "If you ever need me again, I'll not be far away. I promise." They rode off, as fast as the wind, away from Randor, Duncan and Teela.

When they approached Eternos Palace, smoke still wafting from the damaged council chamber, He-Man dismounted Battle Cat and held the Sword of Light aloft once more. "Let the power return!" Again, a bright light surrounded He-Man, causing him to close his eyes, his entire body tingling. When he reopened them, he was young Prince Adam again, no worse for wear. Cringer, who had also returned to normal, yelped and ran toward the palace, eager to leave this particular adventure behind.

Adam smiled at Cringer's actions and at his own joy at having saved his father. Despite this victory, Adam knew that this would not be the only time that He-Man and Battle Cat would be needed. Skeletor had only been given a minor defeat, and would surely be back. In the meantime, Adam was happy in the knowledge that his parents were alright, and that Teela hadn't been hurt in the battle. He began his walk toward the palace, knowing that today was only the first day of a brand new life.

■ ■ ■

"So that's it," King Adam said matter-of-factly, his comment in stark contrast to the fantastic story he'd just told. "Now you know the whole story."

Randor smiled at his son's humility in telling the tale. "I remember that day well. He-Man seemed like such an experienced warrior when I first met him that I never would have guessed that you were so unsure of yourself. I'm so proud of you, son. You must have had to carry such burdens over the years."

Adam chuckled. "Thanks, father, but to be honest, other than a time or two, the burdens weren't so great. I'm lucky to have friends like Teela, Ram Man, and Duncan willing to fight by my side. They've certainly eased the load of any burdens that would have been upon my shoulders. Being king makes being He-Man seem like a vacation."

Randor laughed knowingly. "Yes, I suppose it would. Thank you for sharing your story with me, Adam. We will have many more to share, I'm sure."

Adam smiled, but felt it fade as he remembered his father's task. "But you want to get back to your search for Keldor's fate within that book."

Randor shook his head. "Not quite yet. You're right, I have been spending too much time away from my family since the discovery of this journal. Although it pains me to leave it, I've been without answers for many years. Taking the time to

eat dinner with my son and his lovely wife won't make this book disappear.”

Adam grinned. “I'm sure Teela will be delighted to see you, father.”

They left Miro's old study together, Randor locking it behind them as they made their way to the dining hall, where it was nearly time for the feast in celebration of the King's return.

8.

THE QUEST

After enjoying a wonderful meal with his son and Teela, Randor returned to his quarters and tried to sleep. After several restless hours, he found himself back in his fathers study, drawn once again to the book that fate had brought to him. Today had been a day of revelation already, having heard how his son had become the warrior known as He-Man. Would there be more revelations to come? Would he finally learn the truth of what had happened to his brother? He opened the leather bound book and began to read once more, eager to continue.

■ ■ ■

As our quest to Hordak's temple continued, Keldor and I would run into both adversaries and allies, though those who were more adversarial in nature were far more common. Just as I watched his skill with the Sword of Darkness grow, I observed his powers of manipulation being honed to near-perfection. Over our years together I would see Keldor charm his way into

commanding a small army of powerful warriors. That charm came from a very real place. He did not lie often, at least at that time. He was brave enough to speak the truth.

I learned in those early days that Keldor was not one to easily place trust in others and it showed. He entered into every new relationship with caution, and despite our almost immediate connection, it took time for him to relax his emotions around me.

It was during this next part of our quest that I would begin to see that part of our relationship change. I don't know if he simply enjoyed the fact that I wanted him, or if the feelings between us were truly mutual. At the time, I didn't care one way or the other. Looking back on those days now, I can see that he began to show true feelings for me on our trek into the dark recesses of Tellus. It was perhaps the most "human," for lack of a better term, that I would ever see him. I miss those days.

■ ■ ■

After their meeting with Beast Man, Keldor and Evelyn journeyed further into the Dark Hemisphere, they could feel many different pairs of eyes on them, but whoever or whatever it was that was watching them allowed them to pass without harm. Keldor sensed that their new companion, Panthor, was explanation enough for that. The dylinx had allowed them to place the saddle Beast Man had made upon it, but the massive cat would not allow either of them to ride it. Despite this seeming ambiguity, each night Panthor curled up in a nearby tree or outcropping of rock above them. He would then proceed to sleep, but always on the edge of alertness, fiercely guarding his new master and the woman who traveled with him.

One morning, after several days of traveling, Panthor refused to follow them. Evelyn tried to coo and coax him along, as she had become somewhat enamored of the beast, but he refused to move. Keldor was impatient after several days of walking next to a giant cat with a perfectly good saddle and was prepared to leave him behind when Panthor got up, walked up to him, and promptly laid down again. Evelyn gazed at the cat curiously. "I think he wants you to mount him."

Keldor sighed, exasperated. "Why now, after so many days?"

She smiled. "Well, you broke him with your stare. Maybe he was paying you back by making you wait."

Keldor frowned and looked at the dylinx, its fur so dark that it took on a purplish tint. "Is that it, Panthor? You wanted to punish me?" The cat purred loudly as it exhaled.

A devilish grin raised the corners of Evelyn's mouth. "I think so."

Shaking his head, Keldor mounted the beast, which stood up to its full height with Keldor atop, causing the man to smile, despite himself. "You little bastard."

Evelyn laughed as she took Keldor's outstretched hand and climbed up behind him. Panthor was plenty large enough for them both to ride him comfortably. "He takes after you, it would seem."

Keldor looked back at her over his shoulder and her eyes cut through to his core, as they always seemed to. He felt he could hide nothing from her, intentionally or otherwise. He wasn't sure that he liked that. "Cute." He turned back to the path ahead of them and gently kicked Panthor's sides. With a great lurch forward, they were off, and at a much faster pace, to Keldor's satisfaction.

■ ■ ■

Even during his initial exile, Keldor had never traveled this far into the Dark Hemisphere. Not many from the light side had in the last few centuries, and most of those who risked such a journey never returned from it. Evelyn herself had traveled here sometime in the past during the course of her own quest for knowledge after being betrayed by the previous Sorceress of Grayskull, Kuduk Ungol. Knowing this caused Keldor to admire her even more, as she had made the journey when she was younger, more inexperienced, and more than that, alone.

Much like its counterpart, the Dark Hemisphere had many different types of topography, from barren wastes to lush jungles, from icy plains to volcanic mountains. Regardless of their similarities when thought of in general terms, each of these various types of lands were far more dangerous on the Dark Hemisphere. An evil ambience permeated its lands. Because the vicious nocturnal hunters that called it home thrived in the nearly constant dusk, there were no hours in the day that one would call safe.

Although he was not the type to admit it aloud, Keldor was glad to have Evelyn with him, not just for the company, but because the dangers of the largely unexplored and forgotten Dark Hemisphere could be quite intimidating, even to

him. Her skills in the ancient ways exceeded his, and along with Panthor, her presence soothed any worries that crept up in his weaker moments. Besides all of that, there were other reasons that he enjoyed her company, but he wasn't sure he was ready to admit that yet, even to himself.

Night was falling as they entered another dark and twisted forest. Keldor felt Evelyn's breath, hot in his ear, as she rode behind him on their massive feline friend. "What thoughts occupy that mysterious mind of yours?" she asked, her voice a purr to match Panthor's.

After a brief moment of consideration, he decided to tell her the truth, or at least half of it. "I was just thinking about how I am grateful for your company on this quest, because of your knowledge of the area."

"Is that all?" He could sense the smirk on her face without actually seeing it.

"I'm also thankful that we are no longer on foot."

Her smile widened. "I see."

Suddenly and without warning, Evelyn was knocked from her position behind Keldor and he immediately turned Panthor around to see what had happened. She was on the ground with a large, dark haired beast loping toward her, a club in its hand. Grounded, but merely dazed, she raised her staff toward the creature, a bolt of lightning shooting out of the orb at its end. It struck the beast square in the chest, sending it flying back as the magic blast arced through its body. Keldor rode to her side. "Are you alright?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes, but it's a Shadow Beast. Where there's one—"

Keldor looked up at the trees surrounding them, and the many moving shapes within them. "There's many," he finished for her. These creatures were not the first wild beasts that they had encountered on their journey, but most had left them to their own devices, likely due to the intimidating presence of Panthor. Keldor surmised that the fact that these beasts did not fear their mount was either an indication of a lack of intelligence, or the danger that their numbers represented. Either way, he knew they were about to find out.

As he had predicted, the beasts began dropping from the trees around them, their numbers nearing three dozen. Upon closer inspection, they resembled the Beast Man creature that they had encountered days earlier, but seemed to be on a lower level of the evolutionary ladder. Another noticeable trait that differentiated them from the Beast Man was the single large horn that each had protruding from their forehead. They seemed at least somewhat intelligent due to their use of weapons, but it was their numbers that gave Keldor pause.

He dismounted Panthor and withdrew the Sword of Darkness from its sheath on his back, anticipating his first battle with it since his brief skirmish with Evelyn when they met. In a way, he felt that it was anticipating a fight, as well. He could feel the weapon nearly pulsating in his hand, its power aching to be released and unleashed upon his enemies. The myths surrounding the Power Sword indicated that each half of the sword represented one side of that age-old battle of good versus evil. Many would have assumed that the light half was good and the dark half was evil, but Keldor knew that nothing in life was so simple. Despite this, if it were so black and white, he was convinced that he held the righteous half of the weapon. His cause was just. He only wanted that which should have been his, after all.

Thinking this only solidified Keldor's purpose within his mind and gave him the confidence to destroy those that stood in his way, whether they were Shadow Beasts or his own brother. Despite any previous defeat, he now had the power of Grayskull within this new weapon, and it had found him worthy. The sword began to glow with a purplish hue in his grip and he could feel the power reverberating through his forearm.

Evelyn's eyes widened. "Keldor, look!"

He smiled. "I see it. I have finally begun to tap its true power, and it's only fitting to see what it can do." The Shadow Beasts surrounding them stared in awe at the glowing sword for a moment before charging them, their howls of rage betraying a strong undercurrent of fear regarding the magic weapon before them. Keldor let out his own battle cry as he plunged the sword deep into his closest attacker. "Panthor! Attack!" Upon hearing its master's order, the already prowling cat leapt into battle, swiping and clawing at the larger beasts with a roar. As he battled along with them, he knocked his opponents aside like children with his massive paws, despite the Shadow Beasts' size.

Evelyn and Keldor fought back to back, her staff in her left hand, a curved dagger in her right. The Sword of Darkness glowed fiercely as Keldor clutched it tightly in both hands, and each strike he inflicted threw his enemies back with a power unlike any Keldor had felt before. He wished he'd had it when they were fighting Count Marzo. Even then, he hadn't been fighting for Randor, or for the people of Eternia, but to defend that which was rightfully his. He would never have allowed an upstart wizard like Marzo to take his birthright away from him. He and his brother's forces had been successful in the end, but this weapon would have squashed Marzo's uprising quickly and would also have given Keldor the advantage he had needed in his battle with Randor.

He reminded himself that there would someday be a second chance, and as his blade severed heads and limbs from the beasts around him, he imagined them to be the limbs of palace guards, of Duncan and the Sorceress, and even of Randor and his wife, Marlena, should she interfere. Revenge would be his, and with the knowledge of Hordak's sorcery behind him, allowing him to unlock the full

power of the sword, even Grayskull would be his one day, and then the rest of the universe.

■ ■ ■

The battle ended, Evelyn and Keldor had found a somewhat murky pond to bathe in and remove the dirt and gore of battle from their bodies. It wasn't as clean as water from the Light Hemisphere, but was enough to do the job. Emerging from the pond, Keldor squeezed the water from his long black hair and dressed, waiting for Evelyn to join him. Panthor had bathed in his own way, a slight distance away, licking the blood from his paws and legs, and had since commenced eating the Shadow Beast carcass that he had stubbornly dragged to their current camp. Panthor hadn't eaten since joining up with them, and Keldor imagined that a meal as large as this would last their feline companion days at a time before the mighty cat had to hunt again.

As Evelyn waded waist-deep in the cool water, scooping it up and splashing it onto her face and hair, Keldor eyed her nude form with a thoughtful gaze. She smiled at him briefly before turning her back to him and diving back under the water's surface. While he was still unsure of her, he had to admit that, like most any bond forged in the heat of battle, he had finally grown to trust her, certainly more than anyone else in recent memory. He knew of course that she had her own agenda, and he never let that thought get too lost in the back of his mind, but he felt that, at least for the time being, she was his ally. Maybe more.

She rose back up from the water and walked onto the shore beside him, the setting sun giving her bare skin a glow, even in this forsaken place. "Not the nicest bath I've ever had. Now I know why Beast Man stench so much." She reached into her traveling bag and pulled out a large linen cloak, which she began to use as a makeshift towel to dry herself.

"At least we're somewhat cleaner," Keldor replied. "No journey is without hardship."

"Wise words. But you smell, too."

He laughed and watched her in amusement. When she finished drying, she wrapped the linen around her and closed the gap between them.

"You laugh," she said incredulously.

He smiled. "Yes. Does it bother you?"

"No. I just think it's the first time I've seen you laugh, I mean truly laugh."

She glanced to the ground briefly before returning her eyes to his muscular form. Although they'd shared nights together on their journey, their friendship was still young and somewhat strange and unknown to both of them. "Night is falling," she said quickly. "Let's set up a campfire before more beasts come. They fear the light."

■ ■ ■

The fire crackled in the otherwise eerily silent night. Panthor had graciously allowed his companions to partake of his feast. While the giant cat had seemed quite pleased with it, both Keldor and Evelyn found the Shadow Beast to have an odd, greasy flavor, even when cooked. Regardless, they required its sustenance and ate it despite its foul taste. Keldor actually wondered if he needed to eat at all, given his new form, but hunger pangs still struck him, and he decided it was better to eat bad food than remain in pain needlessly.

Evelyn tossed her bone, picked mostly clean, toward Panthor and the giant cat licked off what meat remained. "Let's hope that Hordak still has some food in his tower that hasn't gone bad."

Keldor raised his eyes to her as she wiped the greasy residue of the Shadow Beast from her lips. It was the most unpleasant part of the meal. "What did you eat there before?"

"It had the basics. Salted swine, things of that nature. Food that would last. Nothing great, but better than this wretched Shadow Beast, in retrospect."

"It's a bit shy of the meals we used to enjoy at Eternos Palace, as well."

She laughed. "I would imagine so." She paused thoughtfully before asking her next question. "Did you often eat with Randor and his wife?"

In the time they'd spent together, it was the first time that she'd questioned him about his brother, at least in a personal manner. "In the early years, yes. I was secretly bitter towards him, but I admit that I enjoyed his company. After years of wandering, it was nice to finally belong somewhere. But I couldn't help but be envious. I should have been at the head of the table as the king, not just a mere lord. I couldn't let something as simple as my fondness for Randor get in the way of what was rightfully mine."

"So you did love him?"

He frowned. "Love? No. He reminded me too much of my father for that. But he tried to be good to me, and because of that, for a time, I tried to be good to

him. In those early years, to belong was enough, but that feeling was fleeting. In the end, he was just as foolish as Miro. I have no love for him. He's a usurper who sits on my throne. I cannot abide that."

Evelyn gazed into the fire a moment before speaking. "I apologize if the question was too personal."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I feel nothing toward Randor and his court but contempt. There's no need to apologize. Thinking back to those early years simply reminds me of what a fool I was."

"But no longer," she said.

Their eyes met. The fire reflected off of hers in a way that made it seem as though it lived inside of her. "No. No longer."

She met his gaze, looking deeper into his eyes than anyone had before. He felt as if she were penetrating his soul and all of its secrets. "If you were to ask me, Keldor, I'd say that once again, you belong somewhere: here, with me." She rested her hand upon his thigh as they sat before the flames. There was a moment of silence between them before she spoke. "I don't know that I'll ever get used to the chill of your skin."

He looked down at her hand and removed it from his leg. "It's not the chill of my skin you should be wary of, but that of my heart."

"How poetic." She smirked. "And overly melodramatic, at that." She leaned closer to him, her long white hair catching the light of the fire in a way that made it seem as if it were glowing in the dark of the night.

He leaned away from her in turn. "Do not take me lightly, Evelyn. I would destroy you if I felt it were necessary."

"But you don't. And it won't be." She leaned even closer, her lips brushing lightly against his before he pulled away, but only slightly this time.

"Be sure that remains the case," he told her in a whisper.

"Of course. Now be quiet." With that, they kissed for the first time, both of them taken aback by the feelings that such a simple act could bring to the surface, while at the same time damning themselves for feeling them at all.

■ ■ ■

The next morning passed without incident, the majority of their journey complete. By mid-day Hordak's temple loomed in the distance, a great stone obelisk piercing the horizon, out-of-place among the flat landscape that surrounded it. To the far left were the Screaming Mountains, named for the sound the wind made as it passed through their unique geography. To the right stood a pair of volcanoes, known in Preternian times as the Gate of Dragons, which led to the land of Darksmoke. Whether the dragons were real or merely myth depended on whom you asked, but many believed in their existence.

When they reached the looming tower at dusk, no entryway was visible to Keldor's eye. Evelyn seemed unfazed by this as she raised her staff and spoke an ancient incantation. A powerful wind whipped up around them, blowing dirt and sand toward them in whirlwinds. A blue glow erupted from her staff and surrounded them, providing protection from the storm as it raged, blinding them to their surroundings. When the storm died down, Keldor saw through the glow that a section of the tower's side nearest them had opened. As the sand settled, the glowing shield retreated and Evelyn began to walk toward the opening. "Come. This is the way in." He followed her, Panthor in step beside him.

As they entered, the stone façade behind them slowly slipped closed again. Darkness enveloped them until Evelyn spoke in the ancient language once more, prompting numerous torches to flare along the walls and light their way down a long corridor. Keldor grinned. "You never cease to amaze me."

She smiled at the compliment. "Thank you, but these are merely parlor tricks compared to the power that Hordak possesses."

"Good. Then this trip will have been worth it." As they walked forward down the narrow hall, she led him to a spiral staircase that seemed to rise to the very top of the tower. Panthor seemed disinterested in climbing the stairs and lay down to rest on the stone floor.

Evelyn walked past the giant cat and gazed upward, following the staircase with her eyes before returning them to Keldor. "This leads to his chamber. It's quite the climb."

He passed her and began to ascend, smiling. "Then let's not waste any time."

She grabbed his wrist. "Keldor, wait." He stopped and turned his head back toward her. She gazed deep into his eyes once more, her own betraying a fear he had never seen in them before. "Keldor, I underestimate neither your power nor your will, but know this: Hordak is a powerful entity. At his first opportunity he will try to use you to enter this realm. This cannot happen if you ever wish to rule here."

"You believe he would defeat me?"

“I believe Hordak would destroy either of us at this point in time. Use him. Learn from him. Then leave his presence behind in this tower. Please.”

His face remained impassive. “Ruling Eternia is my destiny and conquering Grayskull will be my ultimate triumph over this realm. I won’t allow anyone to deter me from either of those goals, including Hordak.”

“Keldor,” she paused, wanting to give her words gravity. “Don’t underestimate his power.”

“I won’t. And someday, my own power will be sufficient enough to destroy him.”

She watched him pull away from her and begin to climb the seemingly endless stairway. She glanced back toward the entrance, pondering whether she should leave. After a moment of hesitation, she joined him in his ascent.

■ ■ ■

They climbed the dark and windowless spiral staircase in silence. Both Evelyn and Keldor could feel the chill around them grow as they made their way and did not dare speak ill of Hordak in case he could somehow hear them. When they had reached the top, they entered a great chamber. A spire stood in the center of the room, mimicking the great tower itself. There were four staircases leading to the top of the spire, each from a different side of the room. Upon the top, where the staircases converged, was a large pool of liquid fire. As Keldor reached the top of one of the staircases, a tremor shook the room, nearly causing him to lose his footing. The pool at the top erupted into a giant blaze and the flames themselves began to take on a distinct shape. It resembled the head of a bat, but almost armor-like in appearance. Its eyes blazed red. It was then Keldor realized he was looking into the face of Hordak. Keldor’s body betrayed no fear, but his mind raced. He forced it to quiet.

Hordak spoke, his booming voice reverberating through the chamber. “Who are you, and why are you here in this place?”

Keldor did not hesitate. “I am Keldor of Eternia. Your pupil, Evelyn, has brought me here to learn your teachings.”

Hordak scowled. “You assume too much. Tell me: why should I desire to teach you anything?”

Keldor continued. “Because you want to enter this realm and conquer it. By teaching me your secrets, I could help you with this.”

Evelyn flinched slightly, and hoped that Hordak did not notice. She sincerely hoped that Keldor was bluffing, and that he had not deceived her.

“Evelyn has spoken truthfully,” Hordak acknowledged. “But why should it be you, and not her?”

“She tells me that I have the potential to be much stronger than she is. You need my power,” Keldor stated, trying to persuade the creature. “I am an alchemist with an intimate knowledge of the ancient ways. Along with this, I have a gift for the dark arts of sorcery. They flow through me of their own volition. Sorcery is in my blood. I only wish to harness that which already resides within me.”

“Why?”

“Because I am also the rightful ruler of Eternia, a kingdom of this realm. My birthright has been stolen from me. I want the power to take it back. I only desire that which is mine. The rest is yours to do with as you please.”

After a moment, Hordak spoke. “So in return for my teachings, you will bring me into your realm?”

Keldor nodded. “Yes.”

The face in the flames was slowly twisted by a wicked grin. “Then so be it. We begin tomorrow.”

“Yes... master.” Hordak’s image faded away as Keldor descended the stairway toward Evelyn. She did not speak, but the look in her eyes betrayed her fear that he had just made a grave mistake.

■ ■ ■

My fears on that day lingered, and for good reason. Keldor did not realize what he was getting into with his pact with Hordak. Things went on as they were, for a time. We stayed in Hordak’s temple while Keldor learned the dark arts of sorcery from one of its masters. The time would come, however, when it would all come crashing down, both figuratively and literally.

■ ■ ■

Randor finished reading this latest chapter and pondered his brother's penchant for making the wrong choices. He did not wait long to continue reading, fearing that his brother's latest mistake would cost him dearly.

9.

ROYALTY ENSLAVED

It had been months since Keldor had begun his training in the dark arts under Hordak. The spells and incantations he learned had not been cast nor uttered in thousands of years anywhere near Eternia and Keldor could feel victory over his half-brother King Randor and Eternia's ally the Sorceress in his grasp. He spent hours every day within Hordak's abandoned temple corresponding with the multi-dimensional despot through a magical veil and continuously learned new and more powerful spells. He had long since surpassed my level of knowledge, but he did not lord this over me. I respected his power enough on my own.

This had not soured our relationship, however. We cared deeply for each other in those days and I was a loyal ally. Our feelings for each other aside, it was hard for either of us to not be on edge during our time there. Despite merely communicating with him through his fiery mystic veil, Hordak's evil resonated in that place. It could be felt long after the warlord's

banishment to the void-like realm of Despondos. His presence was such a physical manifestation within that forsaken tower that I know Keldor could feel its icy breath on his neck at all times, just as I felt it on mine.

When not training in the ancient ways of black sorcery, Keldor and I talked frequently about our plans for Eternia and its protectors. We also spoke, in more intimate moments, of Keldor's history and of his journey to become the man that I knew then as both lover and master. The story that follows is such a tale, told as faithfully as my memory allows.

■ ■ ■

Evelyn stared at the map of Eternia and frowned. Keldor sat upon the long abandoned throne of Hordak and watched her as she puzzled over an area of interest. Panthor lay beside him on his right. The giant cat purred softly as he stroked it behind the ears. After a moment, Keldor stood and walked to her side. "What is it, Evelyn?"

She glanced up at him before returning her gaze to the map, pointing to an industrial area where many of Eternia's vehicles and weapons were constructed before making their way to selling stations near Eternos Palace and the surrounding villages. "The industries may turn against you. What will we do to keep them working if they do?"

He studied the map for a moment in thought. "One of two things will happen. Either a new king on the Eternian throne will not matter to them and business will continue as usual, or they operate due to a fear of what would happen if they stopped. We will continue to need their armaments. Their shutting down production is not an option."

"Could we simply replace the workers? What about those loyal to us? To you, I mean."

He caught the verbal slip, but let it slide. She was his partner in many matters, so it was to be expected. "Though there are those loyal to me, and sick of my brother's rule, there are not enough. The ones we have, we need for our army."

She pointed at small symbols surrounding the production plants, indicating surrounding villages. "What about simply raiding the outlying villages and using the men as slave labor?" She looked into his eyes and caught a stare.

“There is little that I despise more than slavery,” he said coldly.

She raised her brow curiously. “But slavery has built great monuments and civilizations throughout Tellus’s history. Everyone knows this. Besides, your heart is not one to bleed for lesser men. What about it bothers you?”

Keldor smiled slightly. He returned to his throne and beckoned her to his side. “Did I ever tell you about how I met Kronis?”

She walked toward him, her hips moving seductively without effort. “The great mercenary?”

“Yes.”

“No, I was unaware that you knew him. They say he killed Arkonus The Butcher, the mighty gladiator. That act is what spread his name throughout the lands as a ruthless man to have against you,” she paused, “or on your side for the right price. I heard that and other stories about him from my father as a young girl. Is it true?”

Keldor laughed. “Not quite. History has a tendency to change depending on who’s telling the story. It’s true that Arkonus was killed, but the truth has been exaggerated. He was a great gladiator once, but one thing that is not as remembered about Arkonus is that he was a slaver, and it was due to him that I met my old friend Kronis for the first time.”

“So you were there? Well, now I’m interested. Do go on.”

Evelyn sat on the floor between his legs, resting against his right thigh while he continued. He ran his right hand tenderly through her long white hair before resting it on her left shoulder as he talked. “Long before my battle against Randor, and even before the war against Count Marzo during the Great Unrest, I was already an experienced warrior. While admittedly lacking in many of the social graces at that age, I took to the sword like a second language. The bladed weapon felt natural to me, an extension of my very being, and a conduit for my anger. It happened during my first exile, long before I met Randor. I was still a boy in many ways then, and very brash.”

“You? Brash? Surely not.” She remarked, a sarcastic tone to her voice.

He nodded. “Oh, yes. If you think I’m proud now, you should have met me back then. I was quite unlikable.”

She laughed. “You don’t say.”

He smiled in return. “Definitely. It was due to my experience with Kronis that I realized that while I would always depend on myself more than others, it was

good to have allies to fight beside. Before that, I had always fought alone, trusting no one. As I've said, I was an accomplished fighter on my own and didn't often require help. Once, however, I was bested in combat by a group of savage men. It took five of them to defeat me outside of a small town bar. Not having any allies to assist me, I was at their mercy. They did not kill me, as I had expected, but took me to their master, Arkonus. It was during this time, in my twentieth year, that I, Keldor, rightful king of Eternia, became a slave."

She let out a quiet gasp. "You were a slave?"

"I was. For one day only."

■ ■ ■

Keldor's head ached. He could feel himself moving on some type of transport. With much effort, he forced his eyes to open. He was lying on his side, his eyes adjusting to what was in front of him, looming in his immediate vision: a pair of bars. His eyes focused beyond them and he saw through to the large, looming hills of nothing but sand rolling by him. He was traveling in some sort of tank-treaded vehicle reminiscent of the ones used in the old circus caravans he remembered as a young boy in Eternia. It was an older model, much like the ones Keldor remembered. He could tell by the feel of it. Newer models were much easier on their animal passengers and not nearly as rough as this. The ceiling to the cage he was in was low, too low to allow him to stand, and both sides were barred. This usually allowed spectators to see the animals within, but while he'd been to the circus as a boy, this was the first time he'd seen one of these cars this close. Unfortunately it was from the inside looking out.

Keldor felt cold metal on his wrists and realized that he was shackled. He had been stripped of all but his leather trousers. His weapons were of course missing. He sat up carefully, pressing his back against the wall, still groggy from the attack. Had he lost a fight to one man? No, he remembered. Several. Cowards, he thought. He saw that the cage was solid on both the front and back walls, where it must have connected to more cars similar to his. If the situation he found himself in was what he thought it was, he wouldn't be alone.

He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious, and therefore was unsure of how far he'd been taken, but he did not recognize his surroundings. He could see, however, that they were nearing the end of their journey. The caravan they were a part of was approaching a city surrounded by a massive wall, a pair of large wooden doors opening to accept them within its confines. As they passed though, he could see the city was bustling with activity, it's densely packed citizens moving with an urgency in their everyday actions that he had not seen since his time in

Eternos Palace, where he had spent his youngest years with his mother and the Eternian King Miro, his father.

None of the people peering in at him seemed perplexed by seeing a man in a cage, or surely a large number of men in many cages, as he was now aware that he was not alone. He heard others cry out to the people outside for help, to release them from their bondage. Keldor was surprised to hear the voices of a few women among them. He would not beg for help as the others were. Keldor, proud young warrior that he was, would never lower himself with such an act of groveling, but hearing it, and knowing that he was not the only prisoner, confirmed to him that he was nowhere near Eternia. Slavery was not only illegal in his home region, but also punishable by death. No man of sane mind would parade his captives so brazenly if they were anywhere near the kingdom he'd called home as a young boy.

As they began to slow, Keldor's mind was already in motion, trying to find a means of escape. They came to a stop near a palace, modest in size compared to Eternos Palace, but massive in the midst of its neighbors here in this desert city. Two large men, who Keldor recognized as members of his group of attackers, approached the left side of his cage-car. The one on the left, a broad-shouldered human with a face even a mother couldn't love, lifted a large ring of iron keys and unlocked the door to his cage, the wall swinging open to Keldor's right. "Come on. Out with you," the ugly man barked. Keldor scooted toward the edge of the car, trying to avoid having his head hit the ceiling, and hopped down. His feet hit the hard ground, its surface coated with a layer of sand that remained still in the sand storm proofed city.

"You weren't kidding. He is a mutt." A much older man approached from the left, a chain in his hand that led back to many other prisoners, connecting their shackles. Keldor was sure that it was intended to attach to his, as well. The approaching human male was tall and carried a bit of weight that may have once been muscle before years of soft living had also softened his body. He had a thin mustache and wore his long brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail that topped his large head. He was dressed better than any of the others and Keldor took this to mean that he was in charge. "You don't see a half-breed Gar too often."

Keldor's eyes met the slaver's as the man who had unlocked the cage grabbed his arms from behind. "If I were you, I'd choose my words more carefully," Keldor warned.

"So it talks! I didn't know mutts could talk with their tiny little brains." The man smiled sadistically. "If you were me, Mutt, you wouldn't be in chains, so mind your own words unless you want the beating of a lifetime."

As the slaver came closer to Keldor, intending to attach the chain to his shackles, Keldor thrust his head back and into the face of the man holding him. The back of his head smashed into the ugly man's nose, breaking it, Keldor

realized, as he heard the sickening crunch of cartilage. The man dropped with a wail, clutching his face. Keldor turned slightly, kicking a powerful leg backward into his other attacker who had remained behind him, holding the cage door open. The hard kick buckled the man over in a heap as his ribs cracked. Keldor's eyes raised in front of him once again and blazed at the slaver, still approaching with the chain. "Try it and I'll kill you."

The man with the chain stopped. "Brave words for such a young slave." Pulling out a laser pistol, he aimed it at Keldor's forehead. To be in possession of a rare weapon such as this proved that he was quite wealthy, or at least that he had killed someone wealthy to obtain it. "You either let me attach this chain, or this pistol makes a peep hole into your little mutt brain." Keldor knew that he was fast for his size, but he wasn't faster than a laser bolt. With an angry growl of protest, he raised his shackles toward the slaver, who fastened the chain, laughing as he did so. "Smarter than I thought, Mutt." Keldor felt a sudden pain as the man with the broken nose smashed his elbow against the back of the young warrior's head. He dropped to his knees and the finely dressed slaver in front of him kicked him hard in the side of the face. Keldor dropped to his side on the sand and felt blood trickling from his now split lower lip. "Just be smarter next time."

The man proceeded to move down the line, attaching the chain to other prisoners, who did not protest after seeing how Keldor's defiance had been rewarded. Keldor was forced up by the ugly man, whose broken nose was oozing nearly black blood, and was shoved in line with the rest of those captured. While the prisoners were being led into a building lined with cells, the head slaver called out loud enough so that all could hear him. "I am Arkonus! I am your master! You will never escape so don't bother trying. Make no mistake, you will either die here, laboring in my palace, or you'll die there," he pointed to a large coliseum on the outskirts of the city, "in the pit, fighting for my entertainment. Oh, and I wouldn't bother making friends as, either way, you probably won't be here long." Arkonus grinned. "Luckily for me, there are always plenty more of you out there on this dump of a planet."

Arkonus's men, numbering in the dozens now, began unwinding the chain from the prisoners' shackles and forcing them into the cells, four slaves to each. Each cell was small, perhaps eight by eight feet, containing nothing but three walls, the fourth being the cell door. A small barred window and a hole in the floor covered with a grate were the only distinguishing features of the tiny cell. Arkonus walked up to Keldor and clapped his hand on his shoulder. "You have spirit, Mutt, but that won't last. I expect a good death from you."

Keldor's eyes went cold and he projected all of his hate toward the man in front of him. "And I of you." Arkonus smiled and turned away from Keldor, seemingly amused by what he viewed as an empty threat. Keldor spoke up once more. "Count on it, Arkonus."

The men were upon him now, removing the chain and violently shoving

Keldor into a cell with three others, two from his group and one who had already been in the cell when they arrived. The first one he noticed was the large Gar that had already occupied the tiny prison. The dark blue-skinned warrior had robotic armor covering the backs of his arms, presumably to enhance his strength. Apparently, it was surgically attached, for the slavers had not removed it. The Gar had his head shaved bald and was clean-shaven as well, both unusual for adults of his race. He was large and muscular, as Keldor was, but their strength had failed them both, as they were now imprisoned in this place.

The second man in the cell was smaller, and seemingly older. Being of an aquatic race, it was hard for Keldor to tell. What Keldor knew was that the man surely would not survive long in this desert climate, with little-to-no water to be found. Keldor had heard of men like this one referred to as “Aquarians” but he did not know if that was the true name of their race or a name created by others in an effort to describe them. The man had green skin, large, bulbous eyes, and fins on his head that almost resembled ears. His neck had gill slits that moved rhythmically as he breathed. The combination of all of those traits made him altogether different from anyone Keldor had ever seen before. The Aquarian man sat in the corner and wrapped his arms around his knees, which were tucked up against his chest. He murmured to himself in a language that reminded Keldor of the sound of someone gargling water.

The third prisoner within Keldor’s cell was a human woman. She stood tall for a female of her race, nearly six feet, and had long red hair with piercing green eyes. She did not wear much, but what she wore was armored to protect her vital organs.

He was sure that the Gar and the woman were warriors. Keldor could tell from their physiques and their demeanor. The two of them, along with Keldor, were obviously here to fight for Arkonus. The Aquarian man, Keldor speculated, must have been taken for his uniqueness alone. An oddity for the slaver to prize among his collection of living beings. As Keldor eyed the three strangers in turn, the large Gar approached Keldor and looked at him just as curiously.

“What are you staring at?” Keldor asked.

The Gar seemed unfazed by the young warrior’s straightforwardness. “I’ve never seen a half-breed before.” The man’s voice was deep and resonated.

“If you had seen what I did to his guards before Arkonus drew his pistol, you would be more careful of what you said to me.”

The man grinned widely showing his stained teeth. “I mean no disrespect, friend. It’s just that most Gar keep to themselves and don’t breed with other races. Therefore, I find you interesting. My name is Kronis.” He held out his right arm, hand open, indicating that he was holding no weapon. It was a sign of respect and friendship among the warrior Gar race.

Keldor grasped it in the traditional response. "Keldor."

"I'm impressed with your skill, Keldor," Kronis said. "I did see those guards, and you put a real hurting on them, judging by the look of them. Most Gar would hate you simply for not being pureblood. Me? I don't care. I know a warrior when I see one and respect you as any fellow warrior should."

Keldor nodded. "Thank you, although I seek no one's approval."

The Gar warrior laughed, showing his filthy teeth once more. "No Gar would."

Keldor's eyes narrowed and he gripped Kronis's arm tightly. "Do not be mistaken, Kronis. I don't consider myself one of your kind. I tried going to the Gar people as a boy and they cast me out because I was, as you called me, a 'half-breed.' Don't confuse my knowledge of your ways as my having any love for your race."

The large man was nonplussed. "You can consider yourself whatever you want, friend, but Gar blood runs hot, and there's no doubt you have it in you," he laughed.

"Why don't you two just hug and get it over with?" the red-haired woman asked as she rolled her eyes, arms crossed in the far corner.

Keldor turned toward the woman. "And you are?"

"My name is Kira 'Na, but despite your chumminess with that pig-headed Gar there, don't think of me as your friend just because we're trapped here together. If I have to kill you in the gladiator pit, I will. I mean to survive."

Keldor smiled but made himself a mental note to keep an eye on her. "As do I. Something I'm sure we all have in common."

Kronis nodded in agreement before sitting down on the floor of the cell. "Shall we tell our stories, then? There's not much else to do in here. I would know." When he heard no opposition, he continued. "I was a mercenary before this. I even worked for Arkonus more than once. He owed me money and I came to collect. His men jumped me and I was thrown in here. He's a coward who'd rather have me killed than pay me."

Keldor and Kronis both looked at the woman, who sighed in exasperation before she began to speak. "I am a warrior of the North. My village was attacked, and my family killed. I was taken here. That's all you need to know."

The three of them looked at the Aquarian, who didn't bother looking up. "Gwillareeeesh," he gargled out of his throat. Keldor took it to be his name.

“Captureeeed. Hereeee now.” His grasp of the basic language of the planet was thin and Keldor thought it likely that he seldom visited the surface world.

Kronis looked at Keldor. “What about you? What’s your story?”

“Not one I feel like sharing at his time. For now, I’ll say this: before I escape this place, Arkonus will know who I am very well and will regret what he’s done to me before he dies.”

10.

A BROTHER IN ARMS

Sleep was slow to come in the heat and the hard dirt floor did not make for a comfortable resting place. When the light of the sun came into the cell from its lone barred window, Keldor saw that the others were awake as well. Kira 'Na appeared to be praying, and was sitting on her knees, her head bowed. It was either praying, Keldor surmised, or she was in the middle of a battle meditation. He knew, however, that there was not much difference between the two to those who came from the war-torn lands of the North.

Kronis was leaning against the wall, waiting. The Aquarian whose name Keldor couldn't pronounce rocked back and forth on the ground, craving water and muttering again in that strange language of his. Keldor ignored him. There was nothing he could do for the creature. He looked toward Kronis, who returned his glance. "You have experience with Arkonus," Keldor said. "Tell me about him."

Kronis shrugged. There wasn't much else to talk about, anyway. "He's a bastard of the highest order. He used to be good on his word when it came to paying me, and that made it easier to ignore."

"Until he refused to pay?"

Kronis nodded. "Of course. He's not just a slaver, he's got this whole town under his thumb, uses its people however he sees fit to satisfy his desires. He's usually satiated by violence, but sometimes he uses them," he paused, looking briefly at Kira 'Na, but she didn't seem to be paying attention. "Well, let's just say his people aren't willing, no matter what his desire is."

"I see," Keldor said.

"And they usually aren't seen again, whatever the circumstances," Kronis continued, "unless he takes a liking to them. He especially likes the younger ones."

Keldor's face scrunched in disgust. "How is it that the people have allowed this? How does he wield such power?"

"He rules by fear. If you mean to ask how he got it in the first place, he simply killed the old despot and became the new despot."

Keldor nodded. "I suppose that is how it usually goes."

"Why do you want to know about him?" Kronis asked.

Keldor stroked his goatee absentmindedly. "It's good to know one's enemy."

Two guards approached the cell, prompting Keldor to stand. One of them was the man with the cracked ribs from the day before, who glared at Keldor with a fiery anger as he spoke. "Get up," he wheezed. "All of you." He opened the cell door and threw bits and pieces of armor from a rolling cart onto the ground in front of them. "Pick what you want and put it on. You're heading to the pit."

Gwillareeeesh moaned before standing up with the others. Keldor and Kronis picked out two pieces of traditional Gar armor that slipped over the right arm and covered the right pectoral muscle and shoulder blade, protecting the uniquely placed Gar heart underneath. They also slipped on black armored boots that ended above the knee, another common piece of Gar armor. There must have been others of the race here at some point in the past, and if Gar warriors had been killed in the pit, it didn't bode well for those enslaved here. Gwillareeeesh put on a piece of human chest armor that didn't fit his form very well. It was much too big for him and slid around comically. It made him resemble a boy who had tried his father's armor on while no one was looking. The guard motioned to Kira 'Na, but she shook her head, preferring to keep what little armor she had, sacrificing protection for speed and mobility.

"Suit yourself," the guard said. They were led out of the cell and placed back in chains, along with several others. As they walked past a long row of empty cells, Keldor noticed that many of the prisoners were missing, either working in the compound, or perhaps already victims of Arkonus's bloodlust in the pit. Whichever

it was, Keldor realized he may never find out, as his group was led on foot to the coliseum. They could hear the roar of a crowd as they entered its bowels and were marched into an armory full of old, mostly rusted weapons.

Arkonus greeted them at the weapon racks. "Ah, my fighters. A shame to die so soon, but today is a holiday amongst the locals and they like blood for entertainment." He shot a glance toward Keldor, singling out the troublemaker once more. "Don't you like blood for your entertainment, Mutt?"

"Of course. Especially when it's yours," Keldor replied.

"Brave words from the one in chains." He turned his gaze from Keldor and took in the rest of them. "Well, choose your instruments of death."

The guards in the armory outnumbered the slaves and Keldor knew that this was not the time to attempt an escape, weapons or no weapons, but he knew the time would come eventually. When it did, he would recognize it and seize it. Keldor and the other slaves were unchained and he watched the others pick their various death dealing tools. They were mostly inexperienced warriors who grabbed inferior armaments such as two-handed battle-axes, maces, and lances. Long-handled weapons that would keep their enemies at a distance. Only Kronis, Kira 'Na and Keldor reached for the swords, which were shorter and required one to be closer to their opponent, but were also much more effective.

It was actually a pair of swords that caught Keldor's eye. The two swords looked like one twin-bladed weapon, but Keldor had seen its kind before and knew that they could also be split into two separate blades. One half of the sword was adorned with a golden eagle, the other with a purple demon with large ram-like horns. He thought it might be Zalesian in origin, but he couldn't be sure. Either way, it was a unique weapon and it struck Keldor's fancy. It was also one of the only weapons that seemed to be in good condition, as it was probably too heavy and cumbersome when joined for a common slave to wield. Arkonus looked at Keldor's choice and raised his eyebrows slightly, interested and curious as to whether Keldor would be able to handle the weapon. Keldor flipped the sword into the air before catching it and launching into a brief pattern of spins and thrusts, the blades a blur in his hands. Upon seeing this display, the alert guards stepped in closer to their master, their own weapons at the ready.

Arkonus eyed Keldor admiringly, impressed with his skill. "You've held a sword before, then?"

Keldor lowered the weapon to his side. "Once or twice."

The slaver smiled. "Then you should be fun to watch. Good. The crowd will love it!" He turned and spoke to them all once more. "Many years ago, I was called 'Arkonus The Butcher.' I was like you, a slave in the pits, but I became a warrior and fought my way to freedom. Let's see if you can do the same, or if you

simply entertain the crowd with your deaths.”

As they were led out into the arena, Keldor saw that Kronis and Kira ‘Na stuck close to him after seeing his ability to wield a blade. Gwillareeeesh was nearby as well, shivering in fear, as so many of the others slaves were. Arkonus stepped into the middle of the arena and made his announcement welcoming the crowd to the event. When he had finished, he spoke to the various gladiators opposing Keldor’s group, nearing twenty in number, who were standing across the arena floor from them. “Make sure when you kill the fish that you don’t lop off any parts. I want to have him stuffed and mounted.”

Gwillareeeesh let out a moan before Kronis spoke up. “He’ll be betting money on this. He thinks these odds will play in his favor, little fish man, but if we win, he’ll be as upset as a dragon in heat. The best way to get revenge is to cost him money. Trust me, he hates to part with it.” The Aquarian nodded quickly and nervously at the large Gar, steeling himself for the coming battle.

Arkonus walked back the way they had come and took his place in his own private stand above the entrance. “Live or die! It’s your choice!” He struck a bright brass bell with a small hammer. As the chime echoed throughout the arena, the warriors on the opposing end rushed toward Keldor and his fellow prisoners with a loud roar. Though Keldor knew they were likely to be slaves as well, he felt no pity for them, as his only intent was to survive.

Their opponents quickly took down the first group of slaves on Keldor’s side. Most likely that first wave had mostly been farmers or some other type of common folk from the area who had never lifted a weapon in defense of their lives before. When the wave of twenty or so opponents got to Keldor’s group, they met in a clash of steel against steel, the real battle having now begun. They seemed to ignore Keldor himself at first. His light blue skin, a sign of his mixed heritage, caused them to either fear him, or remain unsure enough of him to try to take out his cell mates first. Keldor took the opportunity to observe them.

Gwillareeeesh was faster than Keldor would have thought, and had an amazing ability to jump great distances. He was doing well for himself, to Keldor’s surprise, but was obviously more interested in staying alive by avoiding the enemy than by fighting them.

Kronis, his strength enhanced by the cybernetic components in his arms was doing much better, often cleaving his opponents in two with the power that drove his attacks. Kira ‘Na was faster than nearly any fighter Keldor had seen to this point in his life, her lack of heavy armor allowing her more freedom of movement than most anyone else on the arena floor. At that moment, Keldor saw out of the corner of his left eye that one of the attackers was finally heading for him and Keldor was just as eager to fight as he imagined Kronis had been. He spun to his right, double-sword outstretched in his right arm, and swiftly beheaded his attacker.

He rushed into the battle and heard one of his favorite sounds, the clamor of weapons striking, as he fought. He hadn't found much happiness in his life since his exile as a boy, but if one were to put a name to the feeling he had when in battle, that would have been it. He was at home with a sword in his hand and his life on the line. It came naturally to him.

As Keldor fought he saw that his group was gaining ground, their opponents little match for their skill. Gwillareeeesh had even begun setting up kills for Kronis and Kira 'Na, luring the attacking fighters in and suddenly leaping away to allow his fellow cell mates to grant them a sudden and bloody death.

It was not long before the battle was over and Keldor stood with those victorious which consisted of he and his cellmates, and no others. He was surprised that the Aquarian had lived, but he was good at evasion. The odds had essentially been twenty-to-three and they had survived. If Arkonus had bet on them, he'd be pleased. If not, as Kronis had said, he'd be very upset. The three of them, Kronis, Kira 'Na, and Keldor himself, had proven their worth as warriors. He was surprised that he felt no anger towards the Aquarian for cowardice, but the creature had surprised him with his resourcefulness.

They were returned to their cells, the roar of the crowd fading in the distance. Arkonus approached Keldor, close enough that Keldor could have strangled the man, but he would have been killed in the process by the nearby guards. Besides that, Keldor had something else in mind. "I knew I was right to put my money on you," Arkonus said as he grinned. "You must have killed ten of those men yourself. Truly you are a great warrior, at least when you're thrown against that rabble. I'll make sure you have more of a challenge in your next outing. Next time, you'll fight a true opponent instead of fellow slaves who've seldom lifted a blade." With that, he turned and left. The guards shoved the four of them back into their cell before slamming it shut and locking it with their keys.

Several minutes later, when they were left alone, Kronis spoke up. "What do you think he meant about having more of a challenge next time?"

Keldor smiled. "It doesn't matter. There won't be a next time."

"What do you mean?"

Keldor held up a large ring full of keys. "The idiot shouldn't have gotten so close to me."

Kira 'Na rushed to their side, a smile lighting up her usually solemn face. "How in the worlds did you manage that?"

He shrugged. "When you are forced to raise yourself in the border towns of Eternia, it's necessary to acquire certain skills, lest you die of starvation."

She focused her eyes on his, the wheels of her mind obviously turning. "Who are you?"

"Since we're leaving, I'll tell you. Briefly. It won't be long before Arkonus realizes these are missing. I am Keldor, the rightful prince of Eternia. I was banished from the kingdom, along with my mother when I was a boy. She didn't last long. I had to learn to survive on my own. One day I'll return and reclaim what is mine. That's all you need to know." He reached around the bars of the cell, and once he found the proper key, the door came unlocked with a clang. "I think we've all had enough of this place, don't you?" Keldor swung the door open and the four of them stepped out.

They crept silently through the slave quarters. When they came upon two guards from behind, Keldor motioned to Kronis and Kira 'Na, who killed them soundlessly before they could raise an alarm.

They made their way to Arkonus's armory, which was also guarded by two men. Kira 'Na walked up behind them silently before quickly jabbing both men in the neck with her fingers. Their eyes grew large and bloodshot before they collapsed to the ground. As they entered the armory Keldor asked her, "What did you do to them?"

"Pressure points. I stopped the flow of blood to their brains," she answered in a chillingly calm tone.

"Impressive." Keldor saw that the weapons that they had chosen previously that day had been placed here for future sparring practices. He walked up to the dual-sword and took it off of the wall. Kira 'Na and Kronis did the same with their own respective weapons.

"And now for Arkonus." Keldor looked over to Gwillareeeesh. "Go home, Aquarian." Gwillareeeesh stared at him, confused, before he realized that he was being offered his freedom. He took off in a run, his escape just a few doors away.

Kira 'Na shot Keldor an angry expression. "We could have used him to help us get out of here."

"Maybe as a shield," Keldor retorted. "He'd be worthless in battle here, as he doesn't have enough room to make his earlier tricks work. He's earned his right to freedom by surviving in the pit." Kronis nodded in agreement, despite the fact that fleeing was against the Gar code. Keldor felt that Kronis trusted him and the fact that he would allow such an affront to his warrior god proved it. "You two are free to fight your way out of here, as well. I can kill Arkonus myself."

Kira 'Na laughed. "Why would you do something stupid like that when you could just escape?"

“Because I swore that I would kill him and I’m a man of my word.”

Kronis grinned, eager for more action. “I’ll go with you.”

Kira ‘Na gave the two men an apologetic look. “Not me. You are an impressive swordsman, Keldor, and I have seen your skill in battle, but this is a fool’s errand. Even if you get to him, I’ve heard of Arkonus’s own skill. You won’t survive.”

“Then you’ll be surprised when you hear of his death. He may have been a warrior once, but those days are long behind him. I’m not afraid of him.”

“Neither am I, but I choose to live to fight another day this time.” She inclined her head toward him in a sign of respect. “Good luck.” She turned and with that, she was gone.

Kronis watched as she left. “I wouldn’t mind waking up next to a warrior like that. Gar traditions about cross breeding be damned. You’re just going to let her go?”

Keldor nodded. “Yes. I told you, you’re free to go as well.”

“Impossible. Arkonus still owes me money, and if I can’t get it, his blood will have to suffice.”

“What about Kira ‘Na?” Keldor asked. “You don’t want to go after her?”

“Business before pleasure,” the large Gar answered.

“Let’s go, then.” After one last lingering glance at the retreating form of Kira ‘Na, Kronis joined his new ally. They made their way out of the armory and sneaked through the compound on their way to Arkonus’s palace. They saw guards about, but were mostly able to avoid them in the still bustling crowds. If any of the people recognized the gladiators that they had seen fighting earlier, they ignored them, most likely out of fear. The sun began to set as they reached the palace. They walked around to the side of the building and Keldor noticed a small balcony on the third story. “That’s our way in,” he whispered.

Kronis leaned into Keldor’s ear. “How in the worlds do you expect to get up there?”

“Like this.” Keldor took his double-sword and split it into its two halves.

“I didn’t know it could do that,” Kronis said, wide-eyed.

“I’ve seen these types of swords before. Other than fighting, I’ve known them to be used for another purpose.”

“What’s that?”

Keldor grinned. “Climbing.” He made a leap and plunged the left sword into the stucco wall of Arkonus’s palace, followed by lifting himself up and plunging in the right one further up. He repeated this pattern until he had shimmied his way up to the balcony where he disappeared before returning a moment later with a length of rope. It appeared to be strung together from the tiebacks of very expensive curtains. He tossed one end of the rope down to Kronis and helped haul the large Gar up onto the balcony with him.

Kronis looked around the room suspiciously. “There’s no one around?”

“Apparently not.” As they walked into the room, Kronis saw a large bed in the center of it, with heavily embroidered red curtains surrounding it. He motioned toward the bed.

“I already looked. It’s empty. He wouldn’t be here this time of day anyway, it’s still relatively early in the evening. He’s probably eating dinner.”

“What do we do? Wait here for him?”

“We could, but it’d be a lot less fun.” Keldor walked up to the doorway and cautiously opened it a crack, peering out into the hallway. Empty. They stepped out into it.

Kronis shot Keldor a puzzled look. “There are a lot fewer guards in this building than I would have thought.”

“You’re right,” Keldor agreed. “I wonder if Arkonus’s pride and ego make him feel safe here, or if we’d overestimated the amount of men he actually has working for him. It’s entirely possible that he holds much of this compound in such fear due to a bluff. It’d be a shame, if that were the case.”

“Why?”

“I was hoping to kill a few more of them.”

Kronis’s laugh filled the empty hallway. “Spoken like a true Gar.”

Keldor’s voice took on a serious tone. “I am no more Gar than I am Eternian, friend, remember?”

“Of course. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Just don’t start thinking of us as brothers,” Keldor remarked. “If we were, I’d probably kill you. I’m not too fond of brothers.”

“I understand,” Kronis replied. “I killed mine in battle when I was thirteen.”

Keldor laughed softly. “Now that is spoken like a true Gar. Come on.” Keldor made his way down the hall and began descending the stairs at the end, with Kronis behind him.

When they reached the bottom, they entered another hallway that led them to two guards standing in front of a large wooden door, presumably the dining room where Arkonus would be having his meal. Upon seeing the two blue-skinned fighters, the guards suddenly stiffened and drew their weapons. Kronis drew his sword and Keldor spun his blades showily, trying to intimidate the two guards. The two men rushed them despite his display. Kronis knocked his opponent’s sword out of his hand and rammed his massive shoulder into him. Knocked to the ground, the guard gasped as the air left his lungs. Kronis took the opportunity to plunge his sword into the man’s chest, causing a gurgling sound to escape his right lung as it was punctured.

Keldor’s opponent stopped in front of him. “You may have killed him, but I am a skilled swordsman. I think you’ll see that I’ll fare differently.” The quiver in his voice betrayed him.

“We’ll see.” The guard thrust his weapon toward Keldor who calmly parried the sword to the right with both of his blades before swinging back with the left one and opening the man’s throat. The guard’s eyes went wide with shock, which made Keldor smile. “You shouldn’t gloat. It doesn’t become you.” The man fell in a heap and Keldor walked up to the wooden door, kicking it in violently.

Arkonus glanced up nonchalantly from his dinner, not appearing the least bit startled. “Ah, Keldor the mutt. I was wondering when you’d show up, although I didn’t expect you to bring a friend.”

“What do you mean, ‘expecting me?’?”

Arkonus sighed. “Did you expect me to not notice that my keys had gone missing? You were the only one close enough to lift them.”

Keldor raised his eyebrows curiously. “Then why let us escape? Why let us kill your men?”

“Oh, don’t worry about them. I sent the good ones away, or did you really think that I had so few guards? The ones left at their posts were either plotting against me or were useless as fighters. You’ve done me a service by dispatching them. As soon as I realized you’d taken my keys, I thought of it as a wonderful opportunity to separate the wheat from the chaff around here, all while maintaining the loyalty of my other men as it would have been you that killed them instead of me. You played your part perfectly. As for your escape, that won’t last. I’m sorry that I’ve lost that fish creature, and the woman will be hard to replace. She was a

better fighter than I expected, but you two can't beat me. You'll be back in your cell before my dinner gets cold." He stood up and drew his pistol. "Don't forget, I am Arkonus The Butcher. I've been fed fighters like you my entire life."

Keldor grinned. "Not in a long time." He inclined his head toward the luxurious spread of food on Arkonus's table. "You've gotten old and fat. And none of those you've faced have been like me. I'm no slave. I am Keldor, the true prince of Eternia."

Arkonus laughed softly to himself. "Prince Randor might disagree with you. Besides, even if that were true, which I doubt due to your being a half-breed Gar mutt, Eternia is far away from here. Here, you're just another slave."

"Try telling me that again after I've cut out your tongue. Kronis, watch the door."

"Right." Kronis stood back and though his sword was still drawn, he resigned himself to watch. If Keldor needed help, he'd step in. He still wanted his money from Arkonus, after all.

Arkonus walked around the table and stood in the center of the room, firing off a shot at Keldor without warning. The young warrior blocked the blast with his right blade, sending it back at Arkonus's pistol. Knocking the weapon from his hand, the sudden disarmament eliciting a gasp of surprise from the old slaver. "Nice shot," Arkonus said, the older man's voice wavering slightly before he regained his composure. "I guess we'll have to do this the old fashioned way." He drew his sword, a wicked looking curved blade as wide as his arm, and beckoned Keldor toward him. "Since you're a mutt, I have to wonder about your mother. If your father is truly an Eternian king, I can only assume that your mother is a whore."

"My mother is dead, slaver, and soon, you'll see her in the everdream." Keldor ran at his opponent, split-swords spinning in deadly arcs. He slashed at his enemy with the right blade, while thrusting with the left. Arkonus ducked the slash and parried away the left blade before sweeping Keldor's feet out from under him and slashing down with his sword, narrowly missing the exiled prince who rolled away before springing back up into a fighting stance.

"You're good with a sword, Keldor, but you are still young and have much to learn about battle," he paused, "like minding your surroundings." Arkonus quickly slipped his blade underneath the linen covering his dining table and flipped it up into Keldor's face. Keldor slashed the obstacle to shreds, but he didn't see Arkonus when it fell. Suddenly, he felt a stiff kick to his left side and spun to see his enemy laughing as he charged at him, sword coming down for the killing stroke. Keldor quickly slapped his twin blades back together as one, catching his opponent's blade between them. Arkonus's blade stopped at the hilt of Keldor's reunited sword, narrowly missing Keldor's heart, still only moderately protected by the Gar armor plate. Keldor tried twisting his blades to wrench his enemy's weapon

away, but Arkonus was too fast for him and removed his curved blade before Keldor could finish.

“Impressive.” Arkonus slashed horizontally to the left, and Keldor stepped back, staggered by the table that was now behind him. As his opponent slashed to the right, Keldor placed his foot on the seat behind him and back flipped himself on top of the table. When he landed, he kicked a goblet of wine at Arkonus’s face. The slaver slapped the goblet away with his blade, but the contents still stung his eyes, splashing free of the goblet in mid-air. Keldor jumped high above and over Arkonus, twisting in the air so that he landed facing the slaver’s back. He thrust his twin blades toward the man, skewering the slaver’s left side before he could escape the blow.

“I aim to please.” As he removed his sword, Arkonus spun around with hatred in his eyes. Keldor slashed him open at the waist. “And I aim to kill.” The slaver dropped to his knees, his curved sword falling to the ground as he made a desperate, failing attempt to hold his insides in place. Keldor split his blades in two once more, crossed them, and placed them on either side of his opponent’s throat.

“Any last requests of your slave?” Keldor smiled.

“You shall die for this,” Arkonus spat, blood splattering his chin as he did so.

“Eventually, I suppose, but not for this. I doubt anyone will miss you.” Keldor grimaced, showing his teeth to his fallen enemy. “Know this before you die, Arkonus: I am no man’s slave.” He paused, relishing the moment. “And no one will ever be my master.” He swung his arms apart and the two blades neatly cleaved off Arkonus’s head.

Kronis walked up beside him and looked down at the slaver’s body. He was holding Arkonus’s pistol, which he had picked up on his way over. It still seemed to be in working condition, despite the blast it had taken. “Looks like The Butcher got butchered.”

“Yes,” Keldor said matter-of-factly.

“Good. Now I don’t know about you, but I’m gonna dig around this place until I find my money. You wanna split it? I’ll go fifty/fifty since you helped me escape.”

Keldor looked at his new ally. “I’m not interested in wealth. Go. Get your money. I just want to leave this place.”

Kronis knelt down and started rummaging through Arkonus’s pockets, unfazed by the gore of the body. “Where will you go?”

Keldor thought a moment. "I'm not sure. Wherever my path leads me. You?"

"I'll probably start mercenary work again. Probably use this palace as my base. He won't be using it." He indicated the body. "It'll be far less likely that anyone will cheat me if they hear what happened to Arkonus here." Kronis stood up and looked through the handful of coins he'd found. "You wanna partner up? I could use you in a fight."

Keldor shook his head. "I thank you for the offer, but no. I intend to take back my kingdom, and I can't do that gallivanting across the planet."

"How will you get it back?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure, yet. I'm thinking about sorcery as a secondary weapon to my blade. It's always been an interest of mine."

Kronis looked at Keldor a moment before speaking. "Currency is my life's blood, Keldor. You go off and be a king. Meanwhile..." he looked at the wrecked room around them. "This kind of currency would be of great benefit to someone in my line of work."

"You mean the death of Arkonus?" Keldor asked.

"Yes, exactly. Being his killer would be a huge boon for me."

Keldor waved his hand dismissively. "Tell people what you want. My part in this story is unbecoming one who will be king. I do not plan on sharing it. If you wish to embellish certain elements of what happened here, that is your business."

Kronis looked at the money in his hand and slapped it into Keldor's. It was enough to feed a family of three for a month. "Take this, at least. It'll keep you fed for a while, if nothing else."

Keldor tilted his head curiously. He could count on one hand the number of times since being on his own that anyone had done anything so kind for him. He wasn't sure what to say. "Thank you," he managed.

"Currency for currency, friend. Simply an exchange."

Keldor nodded in affirmation. "I have a feeling, Kronis, that our paths will cross once more someday."

"Perhaps. Until then." Kronis held out his right arm, palm open.

"Yes, until then." Keldor clasped his friend's arm in his and held tight before letting go. After the exchange, Kronis left the room to search the palace. Keldor

removed Arkonus's sheath and belt and put it on, slipping his own dual-sword into it before leaving the palace.

■ ■ ■

Back in Hordak's temple, Keldor sat in the great hall with Evelyn. His place on Hordak's throne had come to feel natural over the last few months of study under his new "master." He felt that the throne suited him more and more as he improved under Hordak's teaching. It was only natural, after all, as he was born to sit on a throne not too unlike this one in Eternos Palace.

"So it was you who killed Arkonus The Butcher? And that's how you met Kronis?" Evelyn asked, her voice nearly a purr in Keldor's ear as she sat upon his right knee, her left arm wrapped seductively around his shoulder. "You're right, the legends do tell a different story."

"They often do, my love. Kronis has made quite a name for himself over the years due to that story, but he has plenty more of his own. My having been a slave, even for one day, is not a part of my life I want the world to know, so I let him take credit for Arkonus's death." Keldor looked about the throne room. Panthor slept to the right of them, always nearby in case of attack, though none was likely to come in this forsaken area of the Dark Hemisphere.

"Will you use Kronis in the coming war?" Evelyn asked.

"Most likely. He owes the early years of his reputation to me, after all."

"Do you think he still remembers?" she asked.

"Do you really think I'm that easy to forget?"

"No, of course not. No one could ever forget you," she answered.

"Good. I'd hate to think what I'd have to do to poor Kronis if he turned me down," he paused, "or tried to betray me."

She smiled warmly as she ran her fingers through his hair. "I wouldn't allow any such thing to happen, my love." He returned her smile as she kissed him lightly on the lips.

■ ■ ■

Randor sat back and reflected on what he had just read. Keldor had indeed been a charming man in his youth. Despite reminding him of happier memories of Keldor that followed their reunion, Randor found himself unsettled by the ending of this most recent chapter.

With Hordak now entering the picture, Randor felt that the end of Keldor's story was fast approaching. Evelyn had surely betrayed Keldor and become Evil-Lyn, siding with Hordak and his lieutenant, Skeletor. Why? What had she gained? She loved Keldor, did she not? Although, she had said several times throughout her journal that things would change between them. What could have happened?

Another aspect of the latest entry that Randor noted was that she had not followed it up with any reflections of her own. It had simply ended. He turned to the next page and saw that it was the section of the book that had been added much later. Had he come to the end already? He stood up a moment and walked to his father's private collection of journals. Was he ready to read this last chapter? For so long, he'd sought the answers as to what had happened to his brother.

So far, he'd read of his brother's numerous poor decisions after he'd left Eternia. Getting mixed up with Evil-Lyn, or at least the woman she was before, was one thing. Training under that vile Hordak creature, the very creature that had stolen Randor's daughter from him, that was something Randor had a hard time accepting. Keldor would harbor no master. He was playing a fool's game with Hordak, thinking he could win. No matter the outcome of that choice, Randor knew that it would lead to Keldor's end, one way or the other. Was he truly ready to learn the truth? Or worse, what if there were no ending? What if after all of this time, all of this revisiting the past and learning of Keldor's journeys, there would be no more answers contained within this old chronicle? Would he still be unaware of his brother's fate? He knew that there was only one way he would ever find out. With that thought, he resigned himself to finishing this task he'd set before himself, and sat down once again in his father's old chair. Randor looked back down to the book before him and slowly continued to read. He felt unease settling deep within him. He knew he could be coming to the close of Keldor's story, and perhaps even to the end of his brother's life.

11.

LOVE LOST, POWER GAINED

It has been many years since I've documented anything within this journal. I found it in an old drawer, dusty and forgotten. The story of Keldor that I had once written with fervor, I came to resent as things changed between us. My excitement in detailing his life withered and eventually died as both of our lives took a turn toward disaster. I look back at the early entries of this old book and I feel a sadness, an ache deep within my soul for a friend long gone. Keldor is no more. He is as dead as our love. As rotten and worm infested as Hordak's heart. My memories of him, lovingly detailed on these pages, are but a distant shore, and the space between myself and that cherished land is shrouded in fog. I look for a light to guide me back there, but there is none. All is darkness.

Things were not always this way. Once, long ago, I had dreamt of Keldor becoming king, with me at his side as his loyal queen. The power we could have had. The love we did have. Now, he's gone, and I feel at times

that what happened was my fault. I know, deep down, that it was not, but how does one reconcile such loss? It's only inevitable that feelings on such matters would vary dramatically from day to day. Some days I hate Keldor for doing what he did. It was his choice. He should have known better. Other days, I feel responsible, that he would not have gone along with it if I hadn't been so eager. But what choice did we have?

Most days, I'm not sure where the truth lies. Somewhere in between those two notions, I suppose. The only truth that remains is that Keldor is gone, and that ache is something that I must live with in my every waking moment, and often in my dreams, as well. I miss him and his roguish smile. His confidence. His conviction. He haunts my days and nights, a ghost from my past that I wish to see again, but it is not to be. All I ever see is an echo of the man, a shadow of what was once the source of my happiness and joy, now lost forever.

I don't know why I'm even writing this now. Maybe it's just a way for me to remember? A way for me to remember that I am not wholly responsible for Keldor's fate? (Though I was surely responsible for the catalyst of the entire situation.) In a way, my documenting what happened is my ultimate revenge on Skeletor and Hordak both, for they have destroyed my happiness. Today I will finally record the truth about the death of Keldor and the birth of Evil-Lyn. This is my story, as best as I remember it.

■ ■ ■

It had been several years since Keldor had made his pact with Hordak: a promise to bring Hordak to our realm in exchange for power. It was a pact that Keldor had never planned to honor. He'd learned all that he felt he could from a creature he'd never truly considered his master and was now a powerful sorcerer in his own right. Early one morning, Keldor awoke me and told me to gather my few possessions. I was not surprised by this. I knew he had gotten restless. More than that, Hordak had been demanding Keldor fulfill his end of the bargain and my love would not be able to keep him placated forever. As we left Hordak's temple, Keldor made sure to destroy it, using his newfound power to bring it crashing down, stone by stone, brick by brick.

Keldor's plan to destroy Hordak's temple had been unknown to me. He'd kept it a secret for fear that Hordak would somehow learn of his deception. Now it was gone. Hordak's power had been great in that place, and Keldor was glad to have severed that strange creature from another realm's strongest link to Tellus. We had both thought, naïve as we still were in those days, that that would be the end of it. But Hordak never forgets a betrayal and even the moments that we had counted as our greatest triumphs were merely a part of his plan.

We had been back at Snake Mountain for nearly a month. Hordak's temple and our time there was in our past, and it was time to move on to greater things. I had also grown more powerful, learning under Keldor's tutelage. I was well aware that he kept the more powerful spells for himself, but he'd actually been quite open about sharing his knowledge with me as he'd studied under Hordak. I can only assume that he often wondered if teaching me would prove to be a mistake one day. By picking and choosing what he would teach me, I'm sure he felt that he was in no danger, should I ever choose to betray him.

I feel that over the years he must have come to think less and less that such a thing would actually happen. I had shown no signs of resentment toward him for becoming Hordak's prized pupil, nor had I tried to steer Keldor away from any of his goals, for in truth, none of my goals could be accomplished without Keldor first achieving his. I wanted power. I wanted to be queen, thus his taking his rightful throne was necessary. I was content with my role in our relationship. That was half the reason for my loyalty. The other half, as silly as it seems now, is that I loved him.

I don't think he was exactly sure what he felt for me. It could have been love, but I'm not entirely confident that Keldor understood what love was. To be fair, I think that what Keldor felt for me was as close to love as he could manage. To a normal man, it would have been simple. For Keldor, every relationship, whether it were with a friend or simply an ally in his cause, was always entered into with great caution. No matter how he himself felt about me, I know that he was aware of my feelings for him. I made sure to show him often enough, especially on colder nights when he allowed me to hold him close, closer than any Eternian wench had in his past. For when I held him, it was not mere fawning over his looks, or admiration due to his position as Lord of Eternia. It was love. As the years went on, he had, if nothing else, no fear of me. Unfortunately, just as he had once feared, his trust in me would ultimately be his undoing.

I don't remember what exactly was said that first time Hordak came to me, whispering within my mind, but I remember how it felt. It felt like I had been unmade. That every fiber of my being was being torn apart, exploding from within. After we'd left his temple, Hordak would come to me again and again over a period of months, trying to convince me to bring him over, into Tellus, so that he could exact his revenge on his apprentice. When he wasn't trying to get me to free him, he would try to convince me to kill Keldor myself. I fought Hordak's influence. I forced him deep down into my subconscious. I knew, though, that it would not last,

and the durations between each attack became shorter and shorter until I was desperate for an escape. I would not allow him through. I would not betray the man I loved to this monster! Little did I know that Hordak wanted me to fight. That was his plan all along, and I fell for it like a naive child, rather than the powerful sorceress I had become.

It was a day that was as dark as night. The Dark Hemisphere rarely saw the sun, but this day was different, a portent for the darkness that was yet to come. I left Snake Mountain, presumably to hunt for some berries that Keldor had grown fond of. I didn't tell him the real reason I was leaving. I had to get Hordak out. Out of my mind. Out of my soul. I could feel him eating at me from the inside like a vampiric embryo. I feared that I wouldn't survive much longer with things as they were.

I fled, leaving Snake Mountain far behind. I didn't want Keldor to sense the spell I would be performing. It was a powerful spell that had nearly doomed Tellus in its distant past, but this time I would be using it on myself. I'm not sure now if I was foolish enough to think that I could control it, where Hordak himself could not, or if I was simply mad with fear and desperation. I ran in a panic through the barren volcanic wastelands that Snake Mountain called home and entered into a creeping forest of vines and jungle. No mere mortal would enter this forsaken place, but I felt that I was something more. It wasn't the forest I feared, but rather the creature lurking inside of my mind. Compared to him, that normally terrifying forest was nothing but trees and exotic plants.

When I began to invoke the spell of separation, an attempt to violently force Hordak from my mind, I knew right away that something was wrong. By that point it was already too late. A reddish glow surrounded me, as if it were blood leaving my body in a cloud-like form. The strange red mist began to coagulate and form a solid shape in the air. I felt as if I were being split in two, torn asunder in some vile, magical parody of giving birth. When the pain lessened, my mind quieted. Hordak's voice was gone. It seemed like I could finally breathe again after a long period of being underwater. It was as if all of my senses had suddenly returned, stronger than before. He was gone! No longer would I have to hear his voice within my mind! It had worked.

To my dismay, it wasn't long before I would hear it again. The evil sorcerer was now standing before me, having been given form by the magical red mist. A dream made material. A nightmare from my subconscious made flesh. "How?" was all I had been able to ask. I was so weak from the spell that I could barely move.

Hordak stood over me and smiled, the effort making his face even more horrifying than usual. His black armor gleamed in what little light there was that day. His red cape hung over his shoulders, draping the rest of him in shadows. "Silly, little girl. You've done exactly as I'd hoped you would."

“How?” I asked once more.

“It was simple. You thought, for all of these years, that my temple was my strongest link to this realm. You were wrong.” He paused, savoring his victory. “It was you, Evelyn Morgan Powers. I planted a seed in your mind long ago, when you still served the Sorceress of Grayskull. I have, this entire time, been festering inside of you. Keldor coming to me was unexpected but welcome. It gave me more time to work my magic on you. I knew that someday he would betray me. I could read it in his soul the moment he made his deal with me.”

“Then why teach him?” I wheezed, the breath feeling as if were being sucked from my lungs. As I grew weaker, he seemed to gain strength.

He breathed in deep, savoring the air in his new body. “Because I knew that if he did not bring me over to this realm, you would. Do you honestly think that I would limit my chances of success to only one variable?”

I wept. I’m not ashamed to admit it. “No.”

Hordak bent down to where I lay, barely able to sit up, and caressed my face gently before gripping it hard in his armored hand. “No, of course not. And you, having served me for so long, should have known better. The horrors that I am about to reap upon your beloved Keldor will be on your head. Remember that when this is over.” He stood and left, walking in the direction of Snake Mountain.

I couldn’t move. I tried to get up, but the effort was too much. Everything went black.

■ ■ ■

I don’t know how long I was out, but when I was finally able to stagger to my feet a wide range of emotions surged through me. There were three that fought hardest to remain at the surface. One was revulsion. I felt violated by Hordak, more now than I had when he was simply in my mind. He’d used me in a way that no one else ever had, and that led to my next emotion: anger. I was furious for what he’d done to me, what he’d put me through. I despised him for the pain he’d caused me. What I felt most of all was fear.

It was that fear that gripped me and caused my legs to become so weak that I had to cast a spell of strength to help them carry me as I ran. A spell of separation had never been accomplished successfully. How could I have thought that I would be able to do it? It was then that I realized that I had done it. It had worked. Unfortunately, I hadn’t understood that the separation would bring Hordak here, free from his imprisonment in Despondos. How could I have known? With

that realization, I knew that I was out of my depth in dealing with a creature of such power as Hordak. I knew in my heart at that moment that Keldor was as well. We would never be able to stop him, not as we were then. We needed to be more. All I could think of as I ran toward Snake Mountain, a spell of haste allowing me to run faster than I ever could have otherwise, was that if Keldor were still alive when I got there, we would have to flee. If we managed to escape, I had a plan.

Years before, I had read of a spell in Hordak's temple that would grant the caster ten times the power they already possessed, but for a price. When you're running for your life to save someone you love, that caveat seems small and inconsequential. If I had known then what I do now, I would have never suggested it. It would have been better if Hordak had simply killed us.

By the time I arrived at Snake Mountain, the battle between the two sorcerers had already begun in earnest. I'm not sure where it started, but when I approached our adopted home, they were outside, amongst the streams of lava that flowed from the mouth of the mountain. Hordak's cape was in tatters, his armor scorched and dented from Keldor's attacks. I began to hope that Keldor could win, but that hope didn't last when I saw that he was wounded. He staggered about the battlefield, not with his usual confident swagger, but with the determination not to fall. It was all he could do to stand and I knew that he would not last long against Hordak in his condition.

Panthor had left us to hunt the morning before and had not yet returned. We could have used his help that day. The only thing I had in my favor was that Hordak had underestimated me, perhaps not realizing that Keldor had shared many of his teachings with me. I don't think he expected me to recover from the spell of separation in enough time to be of any help to Keldor, and my approach from his rear was unexpected. Keldor saw me coming, but made an effort not to look in my direction lest he give away my position.

The sounds of Keldor and Hordak's voices as they chanted incantations and hurled magical attacks at one another drowned out my footsteps as I snuck up on that foul creature that had used me as his vessel to enter this world. I raised my staff, which I never kept far from me, and pointed it at Hordak. I used the most powerful ice spell that I knew and it staggered the weakened conqueror, freezing him in place. Ice crystals formed over his eyes, but I could feel them watching me as I ran past him to Keldor.

Keldor, no longer having to fight, dropped to his knees in exhaustion. "How is he here?" he asked me as I approached him.

"It's a long story, my love. The temple wasn't his link to Tellus, it was me, but I swear to you, I didn't know. He used me."

"I believe you," he said between short breaths, struggling to breathe through broken ribs.

I knelt down and wrapped my arms under his. When I lifted him up into a standing position, the strain caused him to whelp in pain. "You know that spell won't hold him," I said. "I just surprised him. We have to go."

"Yes," he grunted as he held onto me. "It hurts so much, Evelyn. I think I'm dying."

I looked down and saw a rush of blood leaving his body through his gut. It ran down his thighs and dripped into the tops of his boots. It was gruesome and he was becoming even more pale than usual. "How is that possible? I thought you would have healed by now?"

"I can only assume-" he paused, taking a breath, "that his magic is more powerful than that of the Sorceress of Grayskull. He's trumped her 'curse' on me and dealt me a fatal blow."

"Don't worry, Keldor, I have a plan." We began making our way toward Snake Mountain, the sound of cracking ice coming from behind us as we moved with as much haste as his injury would allow. "An ice spell in a volcanic region. Not the best choice I could have made," I said, disgusted with myself for such a mistake.

"Forget it. We must hurry. What is-" he wheezed in pain "-your plan?"

"I know of a spell that can aid us," I told him, "but there is said to be a cost for using it."

"No cost... is too great, Evelyn. Without it, I may not survive." We entered Snake Mountain at its base and made our way up the winding staircase that lead to the throne room, trying to put some distance between ourselves and Hordak. I felt that if we made it deep enough into the structure, we might have enough time to cast the spell before he found us.

I feared that he would not be far behind, despite our efforts, and began the incantation, calling on a being known as The Nameless One to aid us. "In darkness of night, in shadows of day, in absence of light, in death's decay, hear me, oh demon from the deep. Grant me power and might. Awake from your sleep."

Keldor collapsed as we entered the throne room and I could not hold him any longer, weakened myself from my earlier ordeal. We fell to the floor in a heap. This was as far as we would be going. I managed to turn my head to the side and saw a bright light filling the room. My first thought was that Hordak was here, a magical fireball flying toward us to bring us our deaths. However, when I looked up I saw not Hordak, but a mystic shimmer in the air, a veil into the dark dimension of Despondos. An image formed in the middle of the veil: a demon with a yellow-green skull for a face, a long beard hanging from what flesh was left on its bony jaw. Horns crested the creature's forehead and it stank of death. "Who dares

summon Uqquz' Zekul-Mshqx?" Its last words came in the form of a guttural croak, unpronounceable to anything resembling a human. It was no wonder the ancients had merely called him "The Nameless One."

"I, Evelyn, have summoned you," I answered weakly.

Its eyes burned like fire and I felt a fear grip me that nearly surpassed that of what I felt for Hordak. "What do you want?"

"We beseech thee for power. To defeat a mighty foe."

The Nameless One sneered. "Power. Always power. This can be done, but there is a price."

"No price is too great!" Keldor managed, rasping in pain on the floor behind me.

The creature chuckled lightly. "Many prices are too great, mortal, but I feel mine are fair. Are you willing to make a trade?"

"Yes." We both said it in unison.

"Then I will grant it to you. The woman first."

"But Keldor is dying," I pleaded.

"Then you had best be quick, girl. What do you value the most?"

I thought for a moment before I answered, "My love for Keldor."

The creature known as The Nameless One smiled with what was left of the flesh on its gruesome face. "Foolish mortal. I can see your true desires, beyond what you show to the world. I know truths that you will not admit, even to yourself." Its eyes blazed with an inner fire once more, but this time the flames leapt out of the veil and struck me, staggering me backward. "Your power is granted. I take from you what you truly value: your beauty."

"What?" I asked as pain gripped me. It felt as if my flesh was being peeled from my bones and I closed my eyes, screaming out in pain. When I opened them, I saw that my skin had turned a jaundiced yellow color. I felt newfound power surge through me, but I felt hideous and ugly. I turned from Keldor and hid my face in shame. My pride had always been a weakness, and now I was suffering for it.

"Evelyn?" Keldor managed to say. "Are you...?"

"Look away!" I shouted, afraid to see the rejection in his eyes.

“You are still beautiful, Evelyn, my love,” I heard him say. “Now you are simply different.” He paused, struggling to breathe. “Like me.”

I smiled and looked at him, happy to hear the words. Perhaps the price hadn't been so great. I crawled to his side and kissed him gently on the lips, a tear running down my face. Even like this, he loved me. Perhaps he did understand it. When I pulled away, my smile faded as I saw him and was reminded of the shape Keldor was in. Blood was beginning to pool on the floor beneath him. I suddenly became ashamed at my selfish reaction and turned back to the creature from the veil, pleading with him to save my great love. “Please! Help him now!”

“Yes, yes,” the demon said impatiently. “Sorcerer, what do you value most?”

Keldor struggled to sit up on his knees, the continued blood loss making his normally light blue skin take on more of a grayish color. “My birthright. My kingdom,” he gasped.

The flames flew out of the veil and enveloped Keldor, healing his wound to my relief and filling him with a newfound power. “I have given you power and healed you, but you lie as well, sorcerer. What you value most is your immortality, given to you by a sorceress's curse. As payment for the power I give you, and my healing of your wounds, I take away your immortality. You will retain your remarkable healing abilities, but you will no longer live forever.” The creature's eyes narrowed. “For your hubris in trying to deceive me after you witnessed my seeing through Evelyn's lie, I also take more. You say you still find her beautiful? Let us see if she still thinks the same of you.” Flames shot out of the veil once more, this time striking Keldor square in the face.

Keldor screamed in agony as his face melted off, falling in chunks into his hands as he struggled to catch the pieces and hold them in place. Before long, his skin, muscle and sinew ran like water through his fingers, leaving only a yellow-green skull behind, a mockery of the creature from the veil's own appearance. “Why?!” he demanded, the pain making his voice a howl.

The demon smiled wickedly. “Not only I have taken away your immortality, I have given you something to remind you each day that death awaits you, as it does every mortal of your realm. You thought of yourself as a god or a demon, sorcerer, but you are neither. You are merely a man, a sack of meat-covered bones that walks and thinks. From this day forward, the only thing you will see in your reflection will be death. I have granted you power, but you shall never forget your place again.” The Nameless One laughed once more, thoroughly amused, before it vanished.

I called to the man I loved softly. “Keldor?”

He lay there, hands running frantically over his entire head, the smooth

bone of the skull the only thing he could feel. His fingers traveled deep into his own empty sockets, searching for eyes that were no longer there.

“We’ll find a way to undo his spell, my love. I promise. But we have to rid ourselves of Hordak first.” He didn’t seem to hear me. “Keldor?” I asked again.

“I can see,” he said in a panic. “How can I see?” His voice sounded like a whisper being dragged over coals. The magic spell allowed him to speak, but no longer with a voice I recognized.

Behind him, I saw a silhouette creeping up the stairwell, and knew that Hordak was coming.

“My love, we must get up and fight,” I pleaded. “Hordak is here!”

“How can I see? How can I see without eyes?” was all he could say. He stood and, somehow knowing that I was staring at him, pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, hiding his shame. His hands covered what used to be his face and he moaned, sounding as if he were about to go completely mad, when Hordak saw us.

The creature chuckled as he made his way to the top of the steps. “A good spell, Evelyn, although a poor choice for this climate.”

“We’d already discussed that,” I said, once again reminded of the poor choice I’d made earlier.

“Judging from your change in appearance, Evelyn, I take it you made a deal with the Demon of Despondos? It’s an old spell, but The Nameless One’s trickery gives him away.”

“Yes, and now we have more than enough power to destroy you,” I answered, trying to sound calm and collected. I don’t know if I succeeded.

“Do you?” he asked. With a simple gesture in my direction, I felt as if I’d been struck by a fast-moving vehicle, the blow sending me flying, collapsing on the floor. “I was imprisoned within the realm of Despondos for centuries. Nothing you’ve gained from that creature can impress me.” I could feel his eyes burning into me as he gazed down at my sprawled form. “Still, after everything that has happened, you underestimate me.” He turned back to Keldor. “So what was your price to pay, apprentice?”

Keldor turned to face his former master and, upon seeing his new and gruesome visage, a look of fear crossed Hordak’s face, ever so briefly, before he laughed evilly. “Brilliant.”

“What did you say?” Keldor asked, his new voice escaping the enchanted

skull in an icy whisper.

Hordak erupted in a fit of laughter at Keldor's tragedy. "You've gone from 'Keldor' to 'Skeleton.' I was going to destroy you, but you've done it to yourself. This is much more amusing!"

Keldor's empty eye sockets lit up with a magical red fire deep in their recesses. He drew the Sword of Darkness from its sheath and aimed it at Hordak. Purple lightning leapt violently from the blade and struck Hordak in the chest. The impact of the blow sent our enemy flying backward, striking the wall behind him with a loud crack before falling and landing harshly on the stairs he had climbed to reach us. Keldor laughed, but it came out sounding strange. It did not have the air of charm behind it that I remembered, instead escaping from him in a sickly cackle. Our would-be destroyer struggled to reach a standing position as my lover approached him. As Hordak looked upon his former apprentice in shock, Keldor's lower jaw opened slightly, in what I would come to know later as a smile.

Keldor clasped both hands around the hilt of his weapon and raised it high above his head. He swung down angrily to destroy Hordak once and for all. Hordak lunged out of the way and staggered into the throne room once more. Having recovered from his earlier attack, I leveled my staff toward Hordak and loosed a blazing ball of fire in his direction. It struck him in the chest and wrapped around his body as if it were a liquid flame. Hordak's cape caught fire and he flailed his arms uncontrollably, trying to put out the blaze. He seemed as if he were beginning to panic. I felt at that moment that we had him. Our sacrifices had been great, Keldor's much more so than mine, but we now had power enough to defeat Hordak. Perhaps even to kill him and rid ourselves of him forever.

Keldor appeared behind Hordak, the former master still in flames. He swung the Sword of Darkness at our enemy and sliced into his right arm, drawing black blood from the wound, which oozed out like a lumpy slime. Hordak grunted in pain and kicked Keldor away. I smiled as I swung my staff at the hideous creature, striking him in the head with a powerful blow. He dropped to his knees and Keldor stood over our fallen foe, the Sword of Darkness at his throat.

Hordak laughed softly, causing me to raise my eyebrows curiously. "What's so funny, Hordak?" I asked him. "You are beaten."

"I've warned you-" he gasped, "about underestimating me." He closed his eyes and began chanting. Keldor quickly pulled back his weapon before swinging it with all of his might at Hordak's neck. Just before the blade reached its target, a shockwave erupted from Hordak's body, knocking both Keldor and myself to the floor, paralyzing us.

Unable to move, we could only watch as Hordak stood, smoke wafting from his tattered cape, the fire now out. He approached us where we lay. "I have taught you everything you know, but you must think me a fool if you believe that what I've

shown you even scratches the surface of my knowledge. I have lived for countless years. I know of magics that have no existing recordings, spells so old that they are thought lost to the passage of time.” He kicked Keldor violently in the stomach, the grunt from my beloved betraying his weakness, a result of his newfound mortality. Hordak leaned in close. “You are the ones who are beaten, you fools. Evelyn has always been my puppet, and so shall you be, Skeletor.” He emphasized the name. “You are each powerful in your own right. I have spent years training you both. I’d hate to see that time go to waste, so I give you an ultimatum: Pledge yourselves to me, or be destroyed.”

I still wonder to this day if Keldor was about to challenge Hordak and choose death, but I’ll never know. The evil sorcerer leaned closer to Keldor, took his skull into his armored hands and began to squeeze. “If you refuse, I promise that your deaths will be painful. I will shred Evelyn of her newfound flesh and crack your skull like a dragon’s egg.”

“I submit,” Keldor said softly. “Do not kill me.”

My heart sank. Keldor had never admitted defeat in his life. We had made the deal! We had power ten times what we had had before! Yet it was still not enough to stop Hordak. The creature turned to me, his lips turned up in a smile of satisfaction. “And you?”

I looked at Keldor, disfigured, beaten, and broken. Much as I was. “I submit. Do not kill him. Please.”

Hordak let go of Keldor and stood. “Your weakness sickens me. Flush it out and kill it. I will not have weakness in the ranks of the Horde!” He passed his hands over us, and suddenly we could move again. Keldor and I slowly came to our feet. “You two have challenged me more than anyone since D’Vann Grayskull. Despite your inevitable defeat at my hands, you are both very powerful, and your wills are strong. You will be my lieutenants in the Horde. Eradicate your weakness! I will not stand for it.”

He shoved his finger into Keldor’s chest. “Forget your petty schemes for the Eternian throne. As a lieutenant in the Horde, you have planets to conquer! Forget this backwater world and its crumbling castles. Forget yourself. Keldor of the House of Miro is dead. From now on, you are Skeletor! Embrace your newfound power and rule by fear.” Keldor... no, Skeletor nodded.

He then approached me. “And you, Evelyn. Forget your love for this man.” He pointed at Skeletor. “It makes you weak. Embrace the power of evil and all of its pleasures. Lies. Deceit. Seduction. This is where your talent truly lies. Forget Evelyn Morgan Powers. Forget Zalesia. From now on, you are Evil-Lyn. Embrace your power within the Horde. As the one who freed me, voluntarily or not, you will hold a special place in the empire. Do as you will. As long as you do not betray me, you will have free reign.”

Hordak stepped back and took in his new charges. I felt as if I were losing myself. It was a feeling I would eventually get used to and ultimately forget. "I've been trapped in Despondos for some time. My other lieutenant, Shadow Weaver, has been in constant contact with me, carrying on the Horde Empire's mission. It's time we joined her." He turned to leave before looking back at us once more. "That was not a request." As we began to follow him, he opened a moving veil in the air as he walked. A woman appeared within it, her face shrouded by a red hooded cloak. Within the darkened hood, a pair of bright glowing eyes was her only discernable feature.

"Hordak," she said, her serpentine voice sounding as otherworldly as Skeletor's now did. "You are free."

"Yes, Shadow Weaver, thanks to my newest lieutenants, Skeletor and Evil-Lyn. Send a ship to Tellus to pick us up."

"Yes, master. We are entering the coordinates as we speak."

"Good." Hordak closed the veil and as we made our way out of Snake Mountain, a large portal opened in the darkened skies. Not one ship, but a great legion of spacecraft flew out of the whirling vortex to greet us. I had always sought power. Now I had it, both within myself, and with my new status within the Horde. Still, I somehow felt empty. I looked at Keldor, who walked beside me. With his face gone, replaced by that eerie enchanted skull, I did not recognize him. I knew that, at that moment, Keldor had been broken. Perhaps he would not be broken forever and could undo the side effects of this spell someday. Perhaps our love would survive. The future was uncertain, but as we boarded the Horde spacecraft and headed for the stars, I knew that I would remain at his side.

■ ■ ■

And remain at his side I did, until that hope finally died out. There was no going back, no undoing the spell. In the end, I don't think he even wanted to. Sometimes, in those early years, I would see flashes of the man he once was. Although they were fleeting, they helped keep my hope alive. As time passed, however, they became more and more rare.

Years later, we returned to Tellus and stormed the Eternian Palace. I had hoped that this would re-ignite the fire within Skeletor to reclaim his throne, but it did not. In the end, after Hordak betrayed us and stole the Eternian Princess Adora, we were trapped on the Dark Hemisphere behind

the Mystic Wall. We returned to Snake Mountain and underwent a series of recruitments. Kronis was rescued from a maximum-security prison. His fellow prisoner, Tri-Klops, whom Skeletor had once known as Trydor Scope, joined our cause as well. An Aquarian king took on the more pronounceable name of "Mer-Man" and fought by our side in exchange for a promise of the surface world leaving the undersea kingdoms in peace once Skeletor became king of Eternia. Beast Man, much to my dismay, also joined us at Snake Mountain. Having been ousted from the Vine Jungle by his own people, he had nowhere else to go. His control over the wildlife of the Dark Hemisphere would prove to be useful to us in battle.

I saw just how mad Skeletor had become years later when he attacked his old friend Kronis in a fit of rage, severing his right arm at the shoulder and destroying his lower jaw. He had Tri-Klops piece Kronis back together into the cyborg monstrosity known as Trap-Jaw. No one dared betray him now. If Skeletor could do this to one of his oldest friends, how were any of us safe from his madness? After the Mystic Wall fell and we were freed, Skeletor became increasingly obsessed with Castle Grayskull and controlling the power within, forgetting, once and for all, his earlier mission to recover the Eternian throne that was his birthright. By that point, I often wondered if he remembered being Keldor at all.

I look back at these tales now and I would weep if I had any tears left. I used them all in those early days with the Horde, alone in my quarters, when no one was watching. I was a fool to hold on to that hope for so long. I know now that Keldor is nothing more than a ghost haunting me. I see his handsome face in my mind's eye and I smile. When I open my eyes to reality, all I see is Skeletor's skull. A death's head reminding me of my failure. Reminding me of what once was. A fool's dream.

- Evil-Lyn

12.

REVELATIONS

Randor came to the last page, hands shaking as he read it before closing the book in front of him. A tear streaked down the former king's cheek and he did not know if it was from sadness or rage. Rage won out. He leapt from his chair and grabbed the leather bound journal before him, throwing it with all of the force he could manage at the far wall of his father's old study.

It had been right in front of him this entire time! Every year, Randor opened the magical veil on the Winter Solstice, breaking his own creed against the use of such powers, in an attempt to seek out his brother's fate. Every year, he saw only Skeletor within the veil and thought that the sorcerer had blocked his weak spell. Now he knew the truth. Keldor was Skeletor! The spell had always worked, but Randor couldn't see it, or worse, simply would not allow his mind to make the connection. He wouldn't believe it. He wouldn't allow himself to. Now, however, he knew the truth and it shattered him. He felt like a broken man, the breath leaving his body as he fought for composure.

Leaving his father's old study, he swept past Coranah, giving the librarian a hasty goodbye as he made his way to his quarters. He didn't know what he would do, but he had to do something. He felt like a fool! All of these years and Keldor had been right there before him. The answers he'd so long sought were now laid

bare and he wished he'd never learned them. As he reached his quarters, he shut the door behind him and gazed upon his old armor. For years now, it had simply been an ornament in his room, a reminder of past glory.

He stared deep into the shine of the armor's chest plate and saw his reflection within it. It was the image of an old man, weary and tired. Had he ever really had any glory? Real glory? All he could see at this moment was loss. The loss of his father. The loss of his brother. The loss of his daughter. Just two years past, the loss of his wife. And now, perhaps worst of all, the loss of his hope. He pulled his old sword from its mount on the wall and gently placed it down on his bed, so empty now that Marlena was gone. He had to confront Skeletor, the creature that had once been his brother. There was no other way. He would not live in peace again until he had done so.

Startled by a knock on his chamber door, Randor turned and answered it, swinging open the large oak slab to see Coranah standing before him. "Yes, Coranah? What is it?"

Her face held an expression he failed to identify. It seemed like eagerness, but with a tinge of sadness behind it. "Forgive me, Sire, but I must ask: did you finish the book?"

He felt a strong sense of anger well up within him once again at the memory of having done just that. "Yes."

She reached into her belt and pulled out a scroll of paper. "Then I must give you this."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I do not know, only that I was to give it to you once you had finished."

He took the scroll from her and nodded. "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

"Because I was told not to, Sire." With that, she turned and left, taking a corner further down the hallway and leaving Randor's sight. He continued looking in the direction she had gone for a long moment before shutting the door and sitting down on the edge of his bed. He unrolled the scroll and read its contents, written in a startlingly familiar handwriting.

Randor,

Despite what you may think, I hope that this letter finds you well. If you are reading this, then everything has gone according to plan and my decision to give you my journal has paid off. There was no Eternian farmer

attacked by beasts. There was no cave where the mysterious book was discovered. I gave you the journal, from my own hands to yours. Throughout the time that you have been reading "The Chronicles of Keldor," I have been impersonating your Eternian librarian, Coranah, cloaked by a spell to look and sound like her in every way. Do not worry, she is alive and well, and will be released upon my return to my new home.

I'm sure you are wondering why I have done this, and why there was the need for such deception. Ask yourself this: if you had known that the journal with the answers you had sought for so long had been given to you by Evil-Lyn, would you have believed a word in it? Would you have even read it? You may still wonder now, as you read this, whether what you have read was the truth or not. Know this: there is no deception within those pages. What you have read is the truth.

So why have I allowed you to know this now, after so many years of keeping this knowledge secret? The truth is simple, yet also complicated. I will try to explain my motives as best I can. The truth is that I loved your brother. I loved Keldor. It is also the truth that I feel he would have been the better king. My conviction in this matter has never wavered. But it is also the truth that Keldor died long ago. I've just been too much of a fool to see it.

I have served Skeletor for many years now, every day hoping to see some glimmer of the man I once loved shine through. I long for the days of our youth, when Keldor had the seductively dangerous charm and wit of a young rogue who swept me off my feet. I long for the man I once loved to pull me into his arms and kiss me, his cold lips pressed against the heat of my own. But this is childish fantasy.

For years you believed that Skeletor had imprisoned and killed your brother Keldor. Despite the truth on the surface, that Keldor and Skeletor are one and the same, know that your assertions were never wrong. Skeletor did kill your brother. I helped bring that foul creature into the world and my doing so ultimately led to the end of the man I loved.

Any hope I had of bringing Keldor back is gone. Your brother truly is

dead. Let him rest. I have shared this information with you because I am leaving Snake Mountain and returning to my home of Zalesia to live, hopefully, in peace. I am not the only one who has left. Mer-Man left years ago, as you know, but over the last several months, all of Skeletor's allies have abandoned him. Even Panthor, his loyal companion, is coming with me. Perhaps we've all gotten old enough and battle-weary enough to finally see that the madman that Skeletor has become will never win this battle, and would never be fit to be king, if that is even what he still seeks. I am the last to leave. Seeing the others go has opened my eyes, but nothing so much as rediscovering this old journal and remembering the man that Keldor once was.

When you see the changes occur day by day, they seem small and of little consequence. However, when you are faced with the vivid reminder of the man he used to be, it is easy to see just how far he has fallen. Skeletor is a fool and a madman, obsessed with ruling an old and crumbling castle. Now you know the truth. Use it wisely. You will not see me again.

-Evelyn

Randor finished reading the scroll and lay it down on the bed next to his sword. Lifting the weapon in his hand, he felt its weight, heavy in his grasp. He stood up and walked over to his armor. Without thought, he removed his thick leather belt and sheath from the armature and placed it around his waist. As he slid his sword into the familiar old groove, he felt a sense of peace wash over him for the first time in recent memory.

For so many years, he'd fought a mixture of emotions whenever he thought of his brother. He had sought answers for so long, but he'd never contemplated what life would be like after he'd gotten them. The search itself had, in many ways, overshadowed any thoughts of what he would do once he'd learned the truth. The answer surprised him in its simplicity.

No matter the truth of Keldor's fate, whether he'd been murdered by Skeletor, as Randor had long thought, or whether he'd become him, as new evidence suggested, the end result would have always been the same. Randor would avenge his brother. As he had so many times in years past, Randor began dressing himself for battle.

■ ■ ■

Having been alerted by the Royal Guard that his father had left the palace alone and in full battle armor, King Adam burst into Randor's chambers along with his wife. The king and queen had been relaxing when the guards approached. Normally stoic, the guards were in a panic. They could not get his father to tell them where he was headed, or allow them to accompany him. Adam feared that something had happened, that perhaps his father had finally learned the truth about Keldor and it had been what he'd thought all along, that Skeletor had murdered him. What if his father were on his way to confront Skeletor? What could he have been thinking?

Looking for anything amiss in the room, two things caught Adam's attention. The first was that his father's armor and sword were indeed missing. Upon seeing this, Adam felt his pulse quicken and a sense of worry settle in his stomach. The second was a scroll that his father had left on his bedcovers, oddly out of place amongst the otherwise immaculately kept room. "What is it?" Teela asked, her eyes catching sight of the scroll at the same time.

"I don't know, but it's not the book he was reading, as I had expected to find," he answered. "This is something else." Adam walked to the side of the bed and picked up the scroll. He read it aloud so that Teela could hear. A sense of dread filled him as he finished.

"Keldor and Skeletor are one and the same?" Teela asked, in shock.

"Perhaps," he answered. Adam could not deny the possibility that this could all be a trap. Evil-Lyn was the queen of lies and deception and there was no reason to believe that any of this was true. It could all have been a ruse to lure his father to Snake Mountain to dispose of him once and for all.

Adam may be king now, but his father had long been a thorn in Skeletor's side, even when Adam was just a babe. Added to that, his father was acting as his chief counsel, as Adam was still new to the throne. Perhaps Skeletor and his warriors thought that killing Randor would weaken Adam? If so, they were right. If the Eternian king were weakened, so too would Eternia's renewed bond to Castle Grayskull, as the two were deeply connected. Skeletor had never shown any indication that he had known Adam's secret, that he was He-Man, but he might as well have known. This attack was precise in its target. He-Man had always been Skeletor's main obstacle to obtaining the power of Grayskull. What if his father were already dead by the time they got there? If so, the old sorcerer would have struck a potentially killing blow to his enemy, He-Man, and he didn't even know it. Or perhaps he did? If that were the case, then Skeletor was more of a danger to Adam and his family than ever before.

Adam shook such thoughts from his mind. "It could be a trap. Evil-Lyn said it, herself. Why would he believe her? I only hope, true or not, that it's not too late

to stop my father.” They left the room and raced to find Cringer and Duncan.

With both the king and queen leaving the kingdom, along with its Man-At-Arms, they left Mekaneck, who was a trusted ally, in charge. He of course wanted to join them, but they had convinced him to stay. If they did not return by nightfall, Mekaneck would alert the rest of the Royal Guard, who would march to Snake Mountain in an effort to rescue them.

They left in a Wind Raider. Once they had reached the outskirts of the kingdom, they slowed to a stop. Adam and Cringer exited and made their transformations into He-Man and Battle Cat. They rode for Snake Mountain with great haste, He-Man on his faithful mount, Man-At-Arms and Teela flying behind them in the vehicle. They prayed to the gods that they got there fast enough.

■ ■ ■

Randor could hear Skeletor’s cackle as he made his way up the long and foreboding spiral staircase of Snake Mountain. He’d never been inside the actual structure before and the very feel of the place sent a chill down his spine. If he really admitted it, a good part of that chill came from hearing Skeletor. That laugh had always unnerved him, but now, knowing that it was Keldor underneath it all made him even more uneasy. He was beginning to regret coming here. What if it had all been a trap? Could Evil-Lyn be trusted? He got his answer as he came closer to what he assumed to be the throne room and could begin to hear Skeletor ranting and raving to himself.

“Leave me, will she? Fine. Never wanted her around, anyway. I don’t need her! I have all the power I need right here. I don’t know why I kept her around for so long, anyway.”

Randor turned the last corner of the staircase and stepped into the throne room. Skeletor stood on the far end with his back to him. “Perhaps because you loved her once?”

Skeletor spun around, startled. Normally one could not simply sneak up on the skull-faced sorcerer, but he had obviously been pre-occupied. “Randor.”

“Skeletor.” Seeing his skull-like visage this close always unsettled Randor and he was thankful that those times were few. The knowledge he’d recently gained hadn’t changed that feeling of unease. The empty sockets where Keldor’s blue eyes had once been seemed to penetrate Randor’s being. He could see a faint red glow deep in their recesses, and knew in that moment that this could be his last act. He should have told Adam goodbye.

Skeletor continued to glare in his direction as he spoke. "I should kill you now, but I have to admit I'm curious as to why you're here. Seems a bit dangerous, doesn't it? Sneaking in here all by yourself? Oh, yes, I know you're here alone. I can't sense anyone with you."

Randor nodded solemnly. "You're right, I am here alone."

"Why?" Skeletor asked.

Randor had a steely expression that hid his apprehension. "To confront you. I know the truth, Skeletor. I know the truth of what happened to my brother Keldor."

"Do you?" he asked gleefully.

"Yes."

"And what is it?" The lower jaw opened slightly, the closest thing Skeletor had to a smile. "I have to admit I've forgotten."

Randor boldly stepped further into the room. "The truth is that you are Keldor. You always have been. I just couldn't see it," he paused. "I wouldn't allow myself to see it."

"Who told you this?"

"Evil-Lyn."

Skeletor's cackle once again filled the room, echoing off of the old stone walls. "And you believed her?" he asked incredulously.

"Deny it all you want, Keldor, but I do. More than that, I know it in my heart. It was as if I'd always known, but I'd not allowed myself to admit it." He had more to say, but he could feel himself choking up and forced himself to stop, not wanting to appear weak in front of such a dangerous adversary.

Skeletor stood silent for an immeasurable moment before speaking. "What is it you want from me, Randor? I hope you don't expect a brotherly hug."

"No," he answered. "But I will offer you the chance to give up and come with me peacefully."

Skeletor scoffed. "I seem to remember you offering me an olive branch once before. Right after I first betrayed you, remember? I turned it down then, why wouldn't I now? You say you want me to come with you. So I can what? Rot in some prison? I'm not a fool, and I know you're not fool enough to think you have one that can hold me. What is it you really want?"

Randor sighed. "I don't know, brother. I just want it to end."

Skeletor's eyes pierced with a blazing red fire. "Do not call me your brother. The man you knew as Keldor is dead and gone, and has been for a long time. Evil-Lyn finally learned that lesson. Now it's your turn to do the same. You want it to end between us? Fine." He drew the Sword of Darkness from its sheath, the enchanted weapon glowing with power. "I'll give you that ending."

■ ■ ■

"Do you think it's true?" Teela asked as she tightened her harness within the speeding Wind Raider.

She looked at her father, Duncan, as he piloted the flying vehicle in a panic, pushing it to its limits in an attempt to get to Snake Mountain as fast as possible. He-Man and Battle Cat were ahead of them, their speed powered on by the mystical power of Grayskull. Duncan was doing everything he could to keep up with them. "Keldor being Skeletor?" He kept his eyes on the path in front of them, not willing to glance away for even a moment at the speed they were traveling.

"Yes. Do you think it's possible?"

"One thing I've learned in my life, Teela, is that anything is possible, but it's also possible, highly possible, that this is all a trap concocted by Skeletor and Evil-Lyn. Even if it's true, and Skeletor is alone, Randor is still in grave danger. Skeletor is no one to be trifled with. If he truly is Keldor, he's not looking for any type of reunion. Before he was exiled, Keldor swore he'd kill Randor and his family in order take the throne that he felt was his."

Teela thought a moment. "Randor thought that dark magic had changed his brother and caused that betrayal. There were years between their final meeting and the first appearance of Skeletor. What if Keldor had changed somehow in the time in between? The letter that Evil-Lyn wrote made it sound as if Skeletor and Keldor were almost two different entities."

Duncan stole a quick glance at his daughter. "I think it's obvious to any of us that Skeletor is insane. The how's and why's don't lessen the danger to Randor."

She nodded. "You're right, of course. I just can't help but wonder what Adam's father is going through, discovering after all of these years that the brother he's been searching for is Skeletor."

“Knowing Randor, which I have since we were boys, I’d say his first reaction was anger, but his second would be to ask Keldor ‘why?’” Duncan said. “He’s always held the belief that Keldor was twisted by magic, as you mentioned. Perhaps Skeletor is proof that he was right all along.”

They spent the rest of the trip in silence, hoping beyond hope that Randor was still alive.

■ ■ ■

“Have you had enough, Randor?” Skeletor walked in a circle around the former king, who was kneeling on the ground at the sorcerer’s feet, beaten and bloodied. The situation reminded Randor eerily of their first meeting. When he didn’t answer, Skeletor slapped him across the face with the flat side of his sword, knocking Randor onto his side. “You used to have more fight in you. What happened?”

“I got older. I got tired.” Randor shook his head. “I will not fight you, brother.”

“Do NOT call me that!” Skeletor roared. “Always playing the martyr, Randor! The poor boy with no brother. The young king with no father. The father with no daughter. You’re pathetic. I had to fight for my very existence and yet I was made stronger by it. How did you come to this, once proud warrior?”

“What you see as strength, I see as weakness, and what you see as weakness, my love for my family, is my strength. You are wrong.” Randor looked up at the skull-faced man before him. “How has this happened, Keldor? How did you fall so far?”

“Fall?” Skeletor knelt in front of Randor and leaned his face in so close that Randor could see deep into the creature’s empty eye sockets. It was only magic that allowed the sorcerer to see. “You think I’ve fallen? I have ascended to a level of power you could never dream of.”

“And yet you are alone, with even those most loyal to you leaving you to rot here in this forsaken place.”

“That was their weakness, not mine.”

“Is that what you believe?”

Skeletor wrapped his hands around Randor’s neck and began to squeeze. “Yes, and now, since you think of my magic as weakness, I’ll simply choke the life

out of you the old fashioned way.”

Randor began to struggle, falling backward, breaking Skeletor’s hold. He kicked the sorcerer hard in the stomach.

Skeletor backed away from Randor, surprised at the former king’s attack. “I see you still have some fight left in you. Good. Use it.”

Randor stood and drew his sword. “I may not be able to save you, brother, but I can still avenge you.” Skeletor laughed as their weapons clashed. Skeletor’s power dwarfed Randor’s, who was nearly knocked to the ground on impact. He spun and swung his sword at Skeletor’s neck, but the sorcerer knocked his blade away. Skeletor kicked Randor in the stomach and the former king grunted as the air left his lungs. Skeletor raised his sword, his lower jaw opening in his version of a smile. “I’ve put off your death for too many years, Randor. Now here you are, delivering yourself to me.”

Before he could strike, however, Randor rolled out of the way, Skeletor’s descending blade striking the hard stone floor instead. Randor regained his footing and raised his weapon once more. If this battle were to be his last, he would die as a warrior, not a broken man on his knees at the whim of this madman. He jabbed with his sword, but Skeletor spun deftly out of the way of the incoming blade. Randor pressed on, swinging his weapon in a sharp downward arc that connected with his opponent’s left shoulder, drawing a quick yelp of pain from his foe. As he withdrew his sword and began to swing once more, Randor saw that the wound he’d inflicted on Skeletor had already begun to heal. He had to go for the sorcerer’s head. It was his only chance to kill him. Randor spun sharply to his right, extending his arm out, trying for Skeletor’s neck a second time, but the skilled swordsman that was once his brother blocked his attack with little effort.

As they continued to battle, both Randor and Skeletor were startled by the sound of He-Man’s voice coming from the top of the stairwell. “Stop!” The blonde warrior crested the stairs and walked into the room, the Sword of Light clutched in both hands. “It’s me you want, Skeletor. It’s always been between us.”

Skeletor chuckled. “Amusing. You may be my greatest enemy, He-Man, but you are far from my first.”

“Is it true, Skeletor?” He-Man asked. “Are you Keldor of the House of Miro?”

Skeletor sighed and looked at Randor. “What did you do, tell the entire kingdom?” The sorcerer raised his left hand toward Randor, a blast of fire shooting from it toward the former king. Randor blocked Skeletor’s attack with his sword, but his weapon melted and twisted on impact. He dropped what remained of it to the stone floor before it could burn his hand. Skeletor turned from him and slashed the Sword of Darkness at He-Man, who blocked it with the Sword of Light. The two weapons collided in a shower of sparks. As they fought, Man-At-Arms and

Teela rushed into the room and joined the battle. Randor looked on, unsure of what to do now that he was unarmed.

As the heroes fought against Skeletor, his Havok Staff hovered behind him sending blasts of lightning at them as they battled. One got through and struck Teela, sending her careening across the room and into the wall behind them. “No!” Duncan shouted in a rage. He aimed his laser pistol at the skull-faced villain and fired, but Skeletor merely swatted the bolt away with his left hand as if it were an insect. He reached out toward Duncan and closed his fist. He yanked it back toward him and before Duncan even knew what had happened, Skeletor had run the Sword of Darkness through him, entering at his gut, where his armor was thin, and exiting at his waist. Duncan felt the sword sliding through his insides as it withdrew. He did not bleed. The magic blade had instantly cauterized the wound. He fell to his knees before collapsing onto his side, shocked that he had been killed so easily.

■ ■ ■

As Randor saw his friend slump to the floor, he rushed into the battle. Even unarmed, he would do what he could to stop Skeletor. He struck at the sorcerer with his fist but his opponent ducked the blow and struck back with one of his own, blasting Randor hard in the jaw with his elbow. With his father momentarily stunned, He-Man resumed his attack on his bitter rival and the two fought furiously.

Randor heard a cry from behind him as a recovered Teela saw her father’s body lying prone on the floor. She rushed to Duncan’s side, followed closely by Randor, who knelt over his fallen friend.

“He’s alive!” Teela shouted over the clanging of He-Man and Skeletor’s twin Swords of Power. “But just barely.”

“What can I do?”

“I don’t know, I-” the sight of Duncan moving his lips, trying to speak, cut her off. She put her ear close to his mouth in order to hear him over the clamor of the two enchanted swords echoing throughout the throne room.

“Sorcere—” Duncan tried to speak loud enough, but she couldn’t hear him.

“What did he say?” Randor asked.

“I - I don’t know.”

Duncan looked at Randor and pointed at Teela, and then at He-Man, finally

pointing at his own heart. He was trying to tell them that there was something that connected the three of them. After a long moment, Randor nodded his head in understanding. "The Sorceress. He needs the Sorceress's magic to heal him."

"How did you know what he meant?"

Randor smiled at his old friend. "Call it a hunch. Come, I'll help you get him into the Wind Raider."

"But, He-Man-"

"It's alright. I know. I won't leave him."

■ ■ ■

"Your cronies have all left you, Skeletor. There is no use fighting. There is no way you can win without their help." He-Man and Skeletor continued their battle, with He-Man leading his enemy farther away from Teela and Randor, who he could see gathered around Duncan. Was he dead? He prayed he was not, but this was not the time to be distracted. Skeletor was fighting for keeps and He-Man was having a more difficult time than usual keeping him at bay.

"You underestimate me, He-Man, as you always have. I always have a trick up my sleeve." Skeletor began chanting in a strange tongue. The Havok Staff, hovering behind them, began to glow and a bright light shone from behind He-Man, forming a portal of energy. The swirling vortex caused a harsh wind to howl about the throne room, drawing He-Man closer toward it, whipping his blond hair about his face and blocking his vision. "Ever heard of Despondos, He-Man? It's a lovely place full of eternal nothingness, and it's about to be your new home. I have waited so long for this moment, the moment where I will finally be rid of you forever and Grayskull will be mine."

He-Man struggled to stay upright, the power of the vortex pulling both of them toward it now. It was growing larger and as he saw Skeletor struggle against it, he began to wonder if the sorcerer had finally cast a spell that may be too powerful for even him to control. "Looks like you'll be coming with me, bone-head."

Skeletor laughed. "I don't think so." He struck the ground with the Sword of Darkness, driving it deep into the stone, anchoring him as his feet lifted off of the ground. He-Man did likewise with his own weapon and they both held on, fighting against the whirling portal that threatened to devour them both.

■ ■ ■

Randor saw a bright light erupt from the direction of He-Man and Skeletor's battle. He watched He-Man, his beloved son, Adam, almost get pulled into a portal of unknown origin, although surely it was Skeletor's doing. He glanced at Teela, who was also staring in the direction of her husband, a panicked look on her face. She began to get up to rush to He-Man's side, but Randor put his hand firmly on her shoulder and held her in place. "No. Take your father. This is my doing." He looked at his friend, Duncan, who was slipping in and out of consciousness. "I hope you can hear me, old friend. I want you to know that I've spent much of my life searching for my brother, but I was a fool. He was with me all along, fighting by my side. I love you, brother." He squeezed Duncan's hand and gave his daughter-in-law a quick farewell embrace before running toward the portal and Skeletor.

■ ■ ■

Skeletor began to wonder if He-Man was having as difficult a time as he was fighting the pull of the vortex. He meant to taunt his enemy once more, but before he could say anything, he heard a shout coming from the other side of the room. "Skeletor!" Randor screamed as he ran toward him at top speed. His brother crashed into him full-force, causing him to lose his grip on the Sword of Darkness, allowing the harsh winds to sweep him into the swirling vortex. He didn't even have time to scream.

■ ■ ■

He-Man looked on in shock as his father knocked Skeletor into the vortex that led to Despondos. Microseconds later however, he was all too aware that his father was also flying uncontrollably into the portal. He reached out and grasped his father's arm, stopping him halfway. His father seemed to disappear from the waist down, the current of the vortex almost stronger than He-Man could stand, even with all of his strength. It was all he could do to hold onto his father and retain his grip on the Sword of Light at the same time. Randor screamed in pain as his shoulder was dislocated. "Let me go! It's OK!" Randor shouted.

“Never! I can save you!” As he pulled his father’s arm, Randor lifted slightly out of the portal, but roared in pain from his shoulder injury. He-Man knew that he had him. He could save him. It was then that he noticed the other figure climbing out of the portal.

Bluish gray hands with glossy black fingernails could be seen gripping onto Randor’s armor from inside the vortex. It was Skeletor, using Adam’s father to climb out of the portal, inch by inch.

“It’s too late! He’s coming through! You MUST let me go!”

He-Man felt a tear run down his cheek before lifting off of his face and flying toward the portal, its strength pulling in nearly every loose item around them. “I can’t!” he shouted back.

“If you don’t let me go, we’ll all be lost! I’ve already lost my daughter! I won’t lose my son!”

Skeletor’s exposed skull emerged from the vortex, his hood having blown back due to the winds. “Son? Isn’t that rich?” He climbed further up until he clutched onto Randor’s shoulders, almost free.

Randor gasped as he realized that Skeletor now knew the truth. It was too late now. There was only one thing he could do before that monster escaped with the knowledge. “I love you, Adam!” Randor reached up with his other hand and used all of his strength to pry himself free of his son’s already loosening grip.

He-Man watched in horror as both his father and Skeletor disappeared into the vortex. Moments later, the portal closed, its magic depleted. He-Man crashed to the ground, his hand still gripping onto the Sword of Light. The Havok Staff clattered to the stone floor behind him. He-Man felt as if he’d been stretched. Head pounding, he gazed into the spot where he’d last seen his father, but there was no trace of any magic portal or spell. There was simply empty air and the wall behind it. He felt his entire body shake with adrenaline and tears welled in his eyes. His father had sacrificed himself in order to ensure that Eternia would no longer have to fear Skeletor and his evil.

He looked up to see Teela running back into the throne room. He no longer saw her father. She shouted something about getting him to Grayskull. He-Man stood up, sheathed his weapon, and walked to the Sword of Darkness, pulling it from the ground. He could feel Skeletor’s evil within it like a sickness, perhaps forever changing the blade from what it once had been. He would bring it with them to Grayskull so that it would not fall into the wrong hands again. He joined Teela and they ran down the spiral staircase as fast as their legs would carry them. Two Wind Raiders were at the entrance: the vehicle his father had arrived in prior to them, and another one that Teela and her father had used. Duncan had been leaned against the second. She had managed to carry him this far until her

strength had left her. It was still an impressive feat.

He-Man handed Teela Skeletor's weapon and picked her father up as gently as possible, placing him gingerly into the vehicle. Teela got behind the controls. He knew she had witnessed his father's disappearance into the void, but she was right in her urgency. His father was gone, but hers, although unconscious, could still be saved if they got him to the Sorceress in time. As she sped off, he mounted Battle Cat and followed.

13.

DESTINIES REVEALED

Arriving at Castle Grayskull, Adam, still in the form of He-Man, carried Duncan toward the looming stone structure, its jaw-like bridge lowering to greet them. Teela's expression told Adam all he needed to know about how she was feeling. She was terrified that her father was going to die. If Adam were honest with himself, he'd admit that he held the same fear, but he couldn't think like that now. They still had time to save Duncan. The young king was a whirl of emotions over the loss of his own father, but was holding himself together, just barely, as a service to Teela and hers. He had to be strong for them right now. They had arrived at the castle. It was still possible to save him.

As the bridge settled on the hard, barren ground, he carried Duncan over it and into Castle Grayskull, Teela following close behind. Her eyes took in the sight of her surroundings in awe, but she said nothing. Her concern for her father outweighed her interest in Grayskull. A now familiar ball of light floated toward them and shone brightly before the Sorceress appeared before them, appearing to be a shadow in the center of the light before it seemed to be absorbed by her.

The power of Grayskull had granted her lasting youth. She still appeared almost as young as she had been the day Adam first laid eyes upon her. When the Sorceress saw Duncan, an expression came over her face that Adam would

be at a loss to describe. Adam laid Teela's father gently on the floor of Grayskull as he and Teela knelt by his side. The Sorceress likewise knelt in front of Duncan and removed his helmet, a tear rolling down her cheek. Although Adam knew the Sorceress, her reaction surprised him. It was the most human emotion that he had seen from her in all of his years of knowing her and having her counsel.

"What has happened?" The Sorceress whispered.

Adam was the first to speak. "Skeletor. He was stabbed by the Sword of Darkness in our final battle with that sorcerer. Skeletor and my father are gone, but-

The Sorceress's hands trembled as she caressed Duncan's face, his ever-present mustache gray with age.

Adam saw the pain that filled her eyes and asked the question he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to. "Can he be saved?"

The Sorceress continued to gaze into Duncan's face as she nodded faintly. "I believe so, but it will take a great amount of power."

Teela stared at the Sorceress, crying slightly. She had to fight hard to hold herself together. "You obviously care about him. If you can save my father, please do so."

The Sorceress eyed Teela with a sadness that Adam didn't understand. She'd known Duncan, true, but this was somehow more than just a friendly affection.

She nodded and stood. "His wound from the Sword of Darkness is eating him alive from the inside. We need to get him to the Chamber of Souls."

Teela let out a breath that she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Thank you."

The Sorceress nodded once more and began walking away. They followed the mysterious keeper of Grayskull to the room deep in the castle where Adam had first become He-Man. He stole a glance at his wife. From knowing the story of He-Man's origins, he knew she recognized it, despite never having been here. Balls of light flew around the room in a frenzy, illuminating it and sending shadows in a whirlwind around them. The Sorceress gestured toward an altar that Adam hadn't noticed in his one and only other time in this room. "Place him there, but quickly. We must act with haste, before he is lost forever."

He did as she said and they gathered around Duncan, who lay still on the altar. The Sorceress placed her right hand on Duncan's forehead and began to chant quietly in a tongue unknown to them. It was beautiful, as unlike Skeletor's

chanting as it could possibly be. While she spoke, an aura of magic surrounded her and Duncan, seemingly flowing from her body into his.

Teela looked on as the Sorceress's features began to change. The skin around her eyes darkened, her cheeks became sallow, and wrinkles formed on her face for the first time. Her silver hair darkened to a reddish-blond lined with gray. It was with this revelation that Teela realized what was happening: she was aging. The Sorceress was using her own personal power to save her father. After a long moment, the aura faded, and the Sorceress, now appearing to be her father's age rather than the young woman she had seemed, leaned over his body and kissed him gently on the lips. When the woman spoke, her voice sounded fragile and vulnerable. "He will survive."

Teela gazed upon the Sorceress with gratitude. "Thank you. You don't know what this means to me."

The Sorceress's lips curved upwards in a tight smile. "I believe I do. You love him." She caressed Duncan's face once more before raising her eyes to the younger woman. "As I do."

"You love him?" Teela asked. Her father didn't speak of the Sorceress often, and this mysterious woman's familiarity with him told Teela that there was much more to this woman than she knew. "I wasn't aware that you were that close."

"Oh, yes. I know him well. But it has been many long years since we've truly talked, or shared a tender moment."

"Tender moment?" Teela didn't know what to make of what she was hearing. "What do you mean?"

The Sorceress's eyes became wet at the memory. "Years ago, I placed a child into Duncan's care, to love her and raise her in a way that I could not, for my duties as Sorceress were too much, my responsibilities too great."

Teela stared at the woman in shock. "That's me. You're talking about me." She glanced briefly toward her husband, to see if he knew what the Sorceress was talking about, but this all appeared to be as much of a revelation to Adam as it was to her. Teela turned her attention back to the keeper of Grayskull. Gazing deep into the woman's eyes, a realization hit Teela like a dylinx at full speed. Her mouth hung agape and she suddenly felt as if the floor had opened beneath her. She fought to regain her composure as the Sorceress confirmed her thoughts.

"Yes, Teela." The Sorceress said, smiling. "I am your mother."

"My mother?" She felt her eyes move rapidly from the Sorceress to her father and back again.

“Yes, and Duncan is not just your adopted father, Teela. He is your true father.”

Teela began to break down and cry, the emotions she felt nearly overwhelming her. “But why? Why couldn’t I have known this?”

The Sorceress’s expression was one of sadness as she answered. “When I was called upon by Kuduk Ungol, the woman who was Sorceress before me, you were barely a week old. I-” she paused. “I had no choice. The Power of Grayskull is more important than you can imagine. It is the lynchpin of the universe. To be called to protect and serve it is a great honor. As circumstances would have it, there was no one else who could serve. It would be me, or no one. There had been another, an apprentice to Kuduk Ungol, but the Sorceress had seen a vision of the future in which her apprentice did horrible, evil things. She could not let her have the power. It would have been a grave mistake.”

However, Kuduk Ungol was very old,” she continued. “She was dying. Without a protector, Castle Grayskull would fall, and the universe would dissolve into chaos. Despite having little knowledge of magic, I was chosen. Ungol told me it was due to the goodness in my heart, a goodness that could not be corrupted. She sensed it and followed it like a beacon until she found me. I had no other option. Your father knew this. He was with me when Ungol came to me. It was a decision we made together. You could never understand how difficult a choice it was. To have to choose everyone else over myself. To have to leave my daughter behind. To leave the family I loved behind.” Her sad expression was replaced by one of determination. “But it was the only option. I could not let the castle fall. Without the power of Grayskull, the world would have become one in which I would never have wanted to raise my daughter.” She raised her eyes to Teela’s and spoke softly. “I did it for you. So that you would have a good life. A life you deserved, not one of darkness and fear.”

Teela walked around the altar and pulled the Sorceress into her arms. “I understand... mother.” Nearby, Adam felt his own eyes fill with tears as he witnessed a family’s reunion.

“Is there room in there for one more?” All three of them gasped at the sound of Duncan’s voice. They turned to see him sitting on the edge of the altar, alive and well, if not shaken from his ordeal. Both Teela and the Sorceress rushed to him and wrapped their arms around him. “Careful now! I’m still sore!” The women laughed with joy at his recovery as they pulled away. Duncan’s eyes met those of the aged Sorceress and as his smile faded, a look of concern crossed his face. “My love, what have you done?”

She turned away for a moment before returning his gaze. “I had to bring you back, I-”

“Used your power?” he finished for her.

“Yes,” she answered. “Performing this miracle has sapped my strength. I have none left.”

“But you’ll die!” Duncan protested.

A look of defiance crossed the Sorceress’s face as she had expected this reaction from him. “Yes. And I would do it a thousand times more if it were necessary. I could not let Teela lose her father.”

Teela stared at the Sorceress in shock. “What do you mean, ‘die?’ We’ve only just been reunited!”

A small sigh escaped the Sorceress before she could respond and Adam watched in horror as she collapsed to the floor. The three of them rushed to her and Teela cradled her mother’s head in her arms. “I am sorry, my daughter.” Her eyes began to fill with tears. “I never thought happiness was in my destiny, but I am happy that you finally know the truth, and that your father will live.”

“But why? How?” Teela sobbed.

“Because of my love for you, and for Duncan. And because my time as Sorceress was always due to come to an end.”

“I don’t understand.” Tears flowed down Teela’s cheeks as she held her mother close. She was not ready for this to happen. They had so much to talk about, so many things to share and experience together. How could she be losing her already?

“Each Sorceress,” the older woman gasped as speaking became more difficult for her. “Each Sorceress has a finite amount of power granted to them by Grayskull. I used much of it to construct the Mystic Wall. I’ve been,” she paused, “living on borrowed time ever since. I only had to wait until you were old enough.”

“Old enough to what?”

“To take my place.”

Teela glanced towards Adam and her father questioningly before returning back to her mother. “What do you mean take your place?”

“As the Sorceress of Grayskull. It has always been your destiny.”

“I don’t know if I...” Teela trailed off. This was too much for her to take in.

“You have no choice. As I had no choice. Unfortunately, that is the curse of the Sorceress. Never has one been prepared. It is simply a task that must be taken on in times of need.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say ‘yes.’”

There was a moment of silence before she answered. It was only a moment, but to Teela it felt like an eternity. “Yes.”

The Sorceress smiled weakly, pleased with her answer. “Don’t worry, my daughter. Your time as Sorceress will not be long.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are not,” she gasped, “the only one with a destiny to fulfill.” The Sorceress turned her head towards Adam. “Was the Sword of Darkness lost with Skeletor?”

“No,” Adam answered. “We have it.”

She smiled faintly. “Then now is the time for you to know your true destiny.”

“The one you mentioned so many years ago?”

She nodded almost imperceptibly. “Yes. Adam, you must-” she shook in a quick convulsion that stole the air from her lungs before she recovered. “My time is short. You must... rejoin the swords.”

Adam’s brow furrowed. He had thought that the swords were forever separated. “Is that possible?”

“Yes. Restore balance, Adam. It is your destiny. It always has been.” Her eyes drifted to Teela and Duncan once more. The Eternian Man-At-Arms and his daughter were in tears; unable to speak as they both held her close. “Teela, Duncan, and you too, Adam. Thank you. Thank you for giving me a family... at long last.” Tears, not of sadness, but of joy, flowed down her cheeks as she spoke. “I love you all. Do not be afraid. I will always be with you.” With that, her breath quietly left her as a soft whisper. She was gone.

Teela cried out in despair. Her father let out a groan as he tried to fight back his own sobs unsuccessfully. Adam felt warm tears run down his cheeks as he gazed upon the lifeless body of his friend, who now lay prone on the cold stone floor of the castle. For many long years, she had been his council and guide. She was like a mother to him in many ways, and as he saw her last breath escape, the pain he felt over his own mother’s death resurfaced. He cried for his wife’s loss, knowing how hard it was to be in her place. The three of them sat by her mother’s body and cried quietly.

Suddenly, the Sorceress’s body changed, her armor fading into a simple

white gown, her headdress disappearing. She no longer looked like the Sorceress of Grayskull. She now appeared simply as a woman. A mother. A bright ball of light rose from her chest, and entered Teela, who gasped in fear. As Adam and Duncan looked on, Teela's hair turned white and her gold armor changed to silver. As a surge of power rushed through her, she took in her new form, eyes wide at the changes which had come without warning. Teela was still reeling from the knowledge that the Sorceress was her mother, and that she was already gone. Now she was the Sorceress of Grayskull. Everything was happening so fast.

Duncan cleared his throat and spoke. "Teela 'Na."

Teela shot him a puzzled expression as the three of them stood. She had thought at first that he was speaking to her, but her father's eyes were fixated on the body of her mother. "What?"

"That was your mother's name. Teela 'Na." Teela sobbed and ran into her father's arms, knowing for the first time that she had not been abandoned, that Duncan was her true father. He had always been a father to her, but now she knew the truth: he was bound to her not just by love, but also by blood. Adam wrapped his arms around his wife and father-in-law, sharing the moment. Breaking apart from them, Duncan spoke once more. "You said that Skeletor was gone. What happened?" He looked around suddenly, as if realizing something was amiss. "Adam, where is your father?"

Adam fought to keep his composure as he answered. "He's gone. He saved me from Skeletor, who'd opened a portal to Despondos. They were both swept into it."

Duncan hung his head at the loss of his oldest friend. "A hero to the end."

"Yes," Adam said, no longer able to hold back tears over his father's sacrifice. "Yes."

Duncan wrapped his arms tight around Adam, who'd long been like a son to him, even before Adam's marriage to Teela, and held him close. "Then let's not let his sacrifice be in vain, boy. It's time to fulfill your destiny." Adam nodded somberly. Duncan knelt down and picked up the now lifeless body of Teela 'Na, cradling her against his chest as he felt warm tears roll down his face. He'd known that this day would come from the moment she'd accepted her destiny as Sorceress, but he'd hoped to have more time with her before it happened. There were so many things he wanted to say to her. Despite losing the opportunity, he felt, somehow, that she already knew. "We will bury her in Eternia, with her family." Adam and Teela each put a hand on her father's back as the three of them made their way back to the Wind Raider, where they had left the Sword of Darkness with Battle Cat.

■ ■ ■

Adam stood near the mouth of Castle Grayskull. Teela and her father were nearby, holding each other tightly. The three of them had wrapped Teela Na's body in a soft blanket from the Wind Raider and laid her gently across the back of the vehicle. Their return trip would be slow. Before that, however, there was still the matter of her final wish: the fulfillment of Adam's destiny.

Adam's right hand clutched tightly to the Sword of Light. His half of the Sword of Power had had more of an impact on his life than he would ever be able to articulate. The power it granted him through Grayskull had matured him and taught him lessons that had made him a far better man than he may have been otherwise. Its familiar heft was a comfort to him and he found it hard to believe that this would be the last time he would hold it in its current state. If what the Sorceress told him were true and he could reunite it with its sister sword, then this was his final goodbye to it.

In his left hand, he held the Sword of Darkness. It was the first time he'd held them at the same time. He was surprised at its similar weight and feel to his own sword, despite knowing that they were identical halves. Now free of Skeletor, he found that the presence of evil it had carried before had faded. He had thought it forever tainted when he'd first taken it from the scene of their final battle, mere hours ago. It had somehow cleansed itself now that it was outside of Skeletor's influence. The two halves hummed and vibrated in his hands. They felt like two powerful magnets in his grasp, seemingly wanting to be brought together, to be reunited after spending eons apart from each other. He stole a glance at Teela and her father, seeking some sort of guidance on what to do.

Teela nodded. "Do it, Adam. I can feel the power of Grayskull flowing through me, and every bit of it is screaming for you to bring the swords back together, as one. It is your destiny."

Teela, now the Sorceress of Grayskull, stood, stunning and even more vibrant and beautiful than normal in her new form. Adam found it hard to believe, but the evidence was in front of him and impossible to deny. Just like when he'd become He-Man for the first time as a young man, things were happening so fast. "But I don't know what will happen. What if I can't become He-Man again? What if I need to protect Eternia and I can't?"

Duncan spoke first. "Adam, He-Man has always been a part of you. His goodness and strength come from you, not from Grayskull or the Sword of Light. As king, you have more than enough power and, more importantly, friends, than you would ever need to protect your kingdom."

“I agree,” Teela said. “It was not the strength of He-Man’s body that I fell in love with, Adam, but rather the strength of his character. Your character. I don’t know what will happen, but my mother was not afraid, and we shouldn’t be either. She believed in you, as do my father and I.”

Adam smiled. “Thank you. Both of you. No matter what happens, I love you both.”

Teela left her father’s side and walked toward Adam, kissing him firmly on the lips before pulling away. “Do it now, Adam. Don’t be afraid.”

Adam laughed softly. “I feel like a seventeen-year-old kid again, holding the Sword of Light for the first time. Afraid to move forward, but knowing that I have to.” He raised both swords above his head, bringing the halves together as he shouted, “by the power of Grayskull, let the power return!”

Adam felt his body rock as he was struck with the power of Grayskull once more, but this time felt different than every other time. As the swords merged in his hands, the brightness of the magic binding them forced him to close his eyes in order to shield them from the light. A loud hum reverberated through his body and just as he’d felt the power surging through him, he felt it leave, going into the new weapon. When the light faded, he stood as Adam once more, a new sword in his hands, clasped together above his head. He lowered the sword and gazed at it. It shone brightly, as the Sword of Light once had, but dark shadows swirled within it as well, before it all settled into a calm silver. The Power Sword was reunited for the first time since its separation thousands of years before. He had felt the power of Grayskull leave him, and somehow he knew and felt in his heart that this time the change was permanent.

He turned to his wife and father-in-law. “It worked, but,” he paused, “the transformation felt different this time. More permanent. I don’t think I can change back.”

Teela gave him a reassuring look. “You’ve always been Adam at heart, my love. He-Man was needed to protect Eternia from its greatest threat, but now Skeletor is gone. Just as my father said, you’ve grown into a strong king and there are many other warriors that can help us defend the kingdom.”

“I can only pray that you’re right.” He was still unsure. Skeletor may have been Eternia’s greatest threat, but he was far from the only one. “This will take some getting used to.”

Teela walked to where her husband stood and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight.

Duncan couldn’t help but smile as he looked on. Despite the emotional loss of Teela Na’ and the sudden changes to both Teela and Adam’s lives, Duncan was

proud to see his daughter's joy. Adam was a good man. Always had been. He-Man had always been a part of him, and now that Adam had grown to be the man he was born to be, He-Man was no longer needed.

The three of them made their way back out of the castle. After they had crossed the massive jaw-like bridge, it closed behind them ominously. Cringer approached them from the other side of the Wind Raider, no longer in the form of Battle Cat. Adam wondered if perhaps his friend had also changed for the last time.

The swords had been joined, but Teela's mother had said that it would bring balance to Tellus. As she turned and took in her surroundings, she didn't notice anything different. She could feel it within her soul: Tellus was still out of balance, still sick. Suddenly Teela felt as if the spirit of Grayskull were speaking to her, telling her what to do. She turned to her husband anxiously. "Adam, go to the split between hemispheres and trust the sword into the ground."

"Why?"

"I feel something. This is all so new to me, I can't explain it. I just know that it's what you have to do."

Knowing she now had the power of the Sorceress, Adam trusted her feelings and did as she said. The dividing line of the hemispheres was not far from where the castle stood. As the three of them made their way to the border, they walked in silence. If this worked, if it brought balance to Tellus, which had been split for eons, it was a monumental moment in the planet's history and the thought of it humbled them.

It was not long before they reached the dividing line between the Light and Dark Hemispheres, still a rocky mess from the remnants of the Mystic Wall, even all of these years later. Adam glanced at Teela and her father, both allies and friends for years and more than that, his family. There were no two people on Tellus he'd rather be with in this moment. He only wished his father could be here to see it.

As he drove the ancient weapon into the ground, he could feel the power of Grayskull within the sword melt into the dirt and rock below his feet as it began to return balance to the planet. Almost immediately, the ground below them became green and lush and the clouds that covered the Dark Hemisphere for so many centuries began to dissipate and float away. He removed the sword and smiled at Teela who rushed to his side, embracing him. Without warning, the castle began to shake not far behind them. Apparently the spell that had held it together for so long was also broken.

They began to run toward it. Sounds of cracking and falling rocks filled their ears as they approached. The three of them made it to the edge of the chasm

where the bridge had only recently allowed them to cross. They watched helplessly as the west tower toppled and fell, followed closely by its sister tower on the eastern side. The skull façade that loomed over the bridge tilted dangerously to the left before breaking loose and plummeting into the abyss. They continued to look on in awe as the castle slowly and deliberately crumbled into nothing. Its power having left it, the spell that had held the structure together for eons in order to protect it was no longer needed.

Within minutes, like a sinking ship, the castle was completely gone, with no signs that it had ever been there at all. A large portion of it had fallen into the surrounding chasm, but much of the castle had formed a massive pile of brick and rocks on the solitary peak that it had once called home. As they stared, they could see that the changes to the landscape where it had been had only just begun. The contents of the pile seemed to age rapidly, moss covering the stones before giving way to dirt, and then clover and grass. An innumerable amount of flowers sprang from the new ground before aging and dying. It was as if a dozen seasons passed before their eyes within moments. With the deaths of the flowers, their seeds were swept into the wind, flying toward the Dark Hemisphere. As each seed landed, new life came to the barren landscape, spreading rapidly. Moss and grass grew miraculously where there had once been nothing but hard rock and lava. Even the existing trees, once misshapen and ugly, began to heal and sprout new branches and leaves. From these trees, many more seeds would be carried further than their eyes could follow, granting life to the once nearly dead eastern half of Tellus.

“Look! Look at how fast things are changing!” Teela exclaimed as she saw the ground beneath her feet suddenly sprout grass and bright, colorful flowers, the likes of which this area had not seen in thousands of years. Without warning, she suddenly felt ill, and backed away from Adam and her father, a luminescent glow forming around her body.

Adam’s eyes widened in concern as something strange was obviously happening to his wife. “Teela? What is it?”

She staggered backward. “I feel strange.” A glowing light emanated from within her body. She shook as the bright silver of her armor dulled to its usual gold. Her white hair darkened to the reddish-blond that it had once been. She felt as if her breath were forcibly removed from her lungs as the ball of light that represented the Sorceress’s power left her body.

It floated toward Adam, hovering momentarily before leaping into him. He could feel the power of Grayskull surge through him once more, using him as a conduit as it had for so many years. Instead of remaining within him, he felt it flow through his arm and into the reunited Power Sword. After a long moment, the feeling of power that he’d felt had faded, but the weapon in his hand felt reenergized with the Sorceress’s power. He quickly turned to Teela, concerned for her safety. She was being supported by her father, who held her close. “Are you alright?”

“I feel exhausted, but other than that, no worse for wear.” She patted her father on the back, letting him know that she was alright and she again stood on her own. “I think I’m fine. I guess my mother was right when she said my time as Sorceress would be short.”

Adam smiled, thrilled that his wife was not in any danger. He looked into the sword and it shimmered slightly. He could feel that the power of the Sorceress was locked within the sword now, a part of it forever. He may not be able to channel that power to become He-Man again, but Adam felt that the enchanted sword would continue to aid him as he sheathed it on his back.

Adam, Teela, and Duncan stood silently and gazed at their new surroundings, which seemed to pulse and breathe with reinvigorated life. It was a moment that seemed to last forever. None of them complained. The three warriors, along with Cringer, climbed into the Wind Raider and left for Eternos Palace. It was time to return home. They took with them with the body of Teela Na’, who had finally fulfilled her own destiny as Sorceress by guiding them to theirs. While Duncan piloted the vehicle at a slow speed, Adam and Teela looked behind them. He could see the mountains of the Dark Hemisphere become green and lush for the first time in thousands of years as it continued to change. Tellus was healing itself. Balance had been restored, as the Sorceress had said it would be. While he was proud of being the one to have done it, Adam smiled even more as he thought of his father and the sacrifice he had made for his family: his son, his daughter-in-law, and his true brother-in-arms, Duncan. Adam’s family. Without his father’s sacrifice, none of this would have been possible.

Adam smiled as he realized that today was the Winter Solstice, the end of the harvest season with tomorrow bringing the dawn of a new year. It was only appropriate as today was the beginning of a new era for all of Tellus. One of balance, and perhaps, if they were lucky, one of peace.

14.

ETHERIA

In a dimension parallel to that of Tellus, the planet Etheria spun throughout space, a dark speck amongst the cosmos. The sprawling metropolis of industrialized buildings known as the Fright Zone stood cold and still, with no signs of life. A chill wind howled outside a dimly lit tower. Located within a section of the city that was often covered in a thick smog from the nearby factories, the massive structure housed only the highest-ranking members of the Horde. One of those elite members, its Force Captain, Despara, walked silently through a darkened hallway on her way to meet with her adoptive father.

Twin swords sheathed at her hips, she was encased in form-fitting black and gray armor. Her face was hidden beneath a helmet fashioned after the features of Hordak himself. A long red cape flowed behind her as she walked with purposeful steps. The celestial warlord tended to stay in his fortress, but his will was felt throughout Etheria, his home base amongst his conquered worlds. Despara carried out his orders outside of these walls, her own commands holding just as much weight as the Horde leader's. There were murmurs of an uprising against Lord Hordak, but as yet, they had not seen anything to prove it. Despara took it as the feeble hopes of the commoners. They thought that Hordak was a harsh and cruel ruler, but the truth was that they simply did not understand the sacrifices that had to be made to keep a well-oiled machine like the Horde

functioning. If lesser people had to suffer for the good of the Horde, then that was the way things would be.

The armored Horde Captain frowned beneath her helmet, thinking back to her past. She'd been raised in the Whelping Chambers here in The Fright Zone, an abandoned orphan, as so many on this part of Etheria were. Her adoptive father Hordak had taken her from the Chambers when she was an older child, having passed her various aptitude tests. She was given to the Horde lieutenant Shadow Weaver, who was tasked with raising her and naming her. Shadow Weaver was a harsh woman to have as a keeper, but she'd taken care of Despara. She'd clothed her, fed her, and given her a place to live away from the other children. As she'd grown, Despara had entered into combat training and learned the ways of warfare. Once she entered her teen years, she joined the Horde and worked her way up through its ranks, spurred on by her adoptive father. Shadow Weaver and Despara's father had no romantic entanglement, but both had served as a parent to her in their own way and she appreciated their guidance.

Approaching the iron door that led to Hordak's throne room, one of his personal bodyguards, known as Catra, bowed her head slightly in acknowledgement. "Force Captain Despara. I hope all is well," she said in a purr-like voice as she began to open the large door for her superior. She stopped just short of opening it enough for her to pass. Despara knew that Catra was jealous of her. She felt cheated that the Horde leader's daughter would be given the title of Force Captain, ignoring the fact that Despara had earned it. Despara glared at the other woman through her helmet. Catra was pretty in her own way, a human with sharp features and high cheekbones. Her hair was long and black and she wore a cat-like mask upon her head. It was raised high off of her face, acting more like a crown at the moment. Catra fancied herself to be the Horde's queen, although if there were anyone who could claim that title, it would be Shadow Weaver. Despara pondered this and thought that such a situation would then make her a princess. She grinned under her mask, where Catra couldn't see it. A princess. How ridiculous.

"Why wouldn't things be well?" Despara asked.

Catra gave her a wicked smile. "Don't you wonder why Hordak has summoned you? He has prisoners."

Despara's eyes narrowed. "Why would Lord Hordak be concerned about mere prisoners?"

A small laugh escaped Catra's throat as she opened the door the rest of the way. "There's nothing 'mere' about these."

Despara scoffed as she passed Catra, walking through the doorway. "We shall see." She could hear Catra laugh as the woman closed the door behind her. The Force Captain was glad the woman had stayed in the hall. Her presence

irritated her.

As she entered Hordak's massive throne room, Despara took in the sight of it. Stark and clean, with little decoration, the room was mostly made up of black, red and gray: the colors of the Horde. Large banners hung along the walls displaying the Horde sigil: the great red wings of a bat, with Hordak's face at the center. An impressive throne sat at the far end of the room. Resting upon it was the Horde leader, surrounded by a small group of his most loyal troopers. "Ah, Despara, my daughter. I've been expecting you," Hordak said, his booming voice echoing throughout the sparse chamber.

In front of the throne were three shackled men. The one in the center, a commoner, judging from the rags he called clothing, rested on his knees. He had been beaten, most likely tortured, and his sandy blonde beard was caked with blood from his mouth, where several teeth seemed to have recently gone missing. The faces of the other two were hidden under black sacks. The one on the left wore black armor. The other wore red. "What is this?" she asked.

Hordak leaned forward. "The man in rags, my dear, is a member of the Great Rebellion, as they call themselves."

Despara studied the man with a doubtful look that her father couldn't see behind her mask. "There is no rebellion," she said, raising her eyes back to her father.

"Oh, but there is." Hordak raised his arm, pointing to the commoner before her. "Despite all of your protestations to the contrary, he has admitted, after a bit of persuading of course, that it does indeed exist."

Despara tilted her head curiously. "Then how did he come to be here?"

Hordak nodded in the direction of the throne room's door. "Catra investigated this mysterious rebellion and, once she had found one of the miscreants, brought him to me."

"Don't be a fool," she answered calmly. "Catra only seeks to discredit me."

"A fool?" Hordak's eyes narrowed. "A FOOL?!" He quickly stood as he shouted the words. "You dare accuse me of being a fool when this rebellion has slipped right under your nose?!"

Despara stepped back, away from Hordak's rage. "I am sorry, father. I merely meant to say that-"

"I am not a fool," he said, angrily interrupting her. Hordak walked toward the man in shackles. "You see this man?" He asked as he backhanded the prisoner sharply across his face. "Your hubris has blinded you, daughter. I

extracted the information myself. Do you honestly believe that I would trust Catra at her word with such information? I know she covets your position.”

He stepped toward Despara and she feared for a moment that she was about to endure another of his beatings. Though it had been many years since the last, nearly a decade, she still remembered how they felt. They had been a part of her conditioning. A necessary step along the path to making her a warrior. Remembering this, she felt her fear slip away. As harsh as they had been, they’d served their purpose. If she had more lessons to learn, then so be it.

Instead, he leaned in close, speaking to her privately, where the troopers that stood guard could not hear. “Although you have allowed this rebellion to gather unnoticed, you must know, my daughter, that I still trust you more than I ever would that woman. I had thought to prove her accusations false, to defend you. I was as surprised as you were to find out that the rumors were true.” He stepped back, walking around the prisoner once more. Resting his armored hands on the man’s shoulders, Hordak spoke to him. “Are you a rebel? Speak the truth.”

The man looked at Despara with eyes full of hatred. “Yes, and proud of it! And there are others! Soon your house will fall! You shall-” he stopped speaking suddenly as Hordak reached in and ripped out the man’s tongue, causing the prisoner to cry out and choke violently. Through screams full of blood and the man’s howling, Hordak held him steady on his knees.

“What do we do to rebels, my daughter?” he asked.

She removed her helmet to reveal a beautiful human face. Blond hair sat close-cropped to her head and her blue eyes sparkled as she saw great and wondrous battles in her future. Perhaps this rebellion was a gift to her. “We kill them, father.”

“Yes.”

Despara drew her twin swords and crossed them, placing one on either side of the man’s neck. Looking at the man, she curled her lip in a sadistic smile. “The Horde is eternal, commoner. Death to its enemies.” She reached back with each weapon as Hordak looked on, pleased with his daughter. He had always known she would be powerful. He watched as she spread her arms outward in a smooth, swift motion, crossing the swords and decapitating the prisoner with cold precision. Blood splattered her face and hair as she glanced up at her father. “Death to the Great Rebellion.”

Hordak grinned as she executed the man. He was proud of the woman she had grown into, of the weapon she had become. Despara nodded toward the other two prisoners. “And these two? Rebels, as well?”

“No. These are two very old friends of mine, recently plucked from the

dimension of Despondos. I almost left them there, as their fate was most amusing to me, but you know how I hate loose ends.”

“Who are they?”

Hordak slowly removed their hoods. The man on the left had a grotesque yellow-green skull in place of a face. The glowing aura around his jaw indicated a spell of silence, presumably to keep him from uttering any incantations. A sorcerer, surely. This, along with his distinctive visage, confirmed his identity. She had heard of this man from Hordak and Shadow Weaver. An old apprentice that had betrayed Hordak in the past.

The man on the right she did not recognize, although something about him seemed vaguely familiar. He was human, with dark brown hair, now laced with gray, and a thick beard of the same color. His posture read as weary and beaten, though there was an underlying strength hidden beneath it. As he raised his eyes to hers she saw them widen in shock. The rate of his breathing visibly increased while he looked her over, as if trying to remember a long-forgotten face. His mouth opened slightly, but he said nothing. The man looked toward Hordak who merely smiled and nodded, reveling in some shared knowledge that Despara did not understand. “Yes,” her father said quietly.

She walked toward the mysterious prisoner and raised her right sword to his throat. Tilting her head slightly to the side, she asked him, “Who are you, old man?” After a moment of silence, she tapped his cheek with the flat of her blade. “I asked you a question, prisoner!” The man looked deep into her eyes. She felt as if her soul were open to him and it made her uneasy. She pulled the sword away and prepared to strike before he smiled unexpectedly, causing her to halt the killing blow. “What could you possibly be smiling about, at this, the moment of your death?” Mere seconds of silence seemed to stretch on forever before he answered; a tear tracing its way down his cheek.

“You have your mother’s eyes.”

THE END

AFTERWORD

You're probably thinking, "what's the point of this whole thing?"

Basically, I wanted to give Skeletor his due. When I began writing this story in 2000, it was originally just the story of Keldor's betrayal and his curse by the Sorceress of Grayskull leading to his taking half of the Power Sword and meeting up with Evil-Lyn. That was it. It was just a simple short story of Keldor and Randor's battle and a little side quest. It was nine pages long. I revisited it every few years to touch it up, add things, subtract things, etc. I wrote a couple of other short stories that followed it, but it never amounted to much and I honestly never took it too seriously. After more than ten years, it added up to about 50 pages of Keldor stories, which, while technically chronological, didn't really have anything strongly linking them. They were simply stories I wrote for fun, purely for myself. Eventually, that changed around September of 2012, when my wife and I had a discussion over a restaurant dinner as to how I could make it better. This mainly consisted of giving those separate stories a framework of some kind. As one aspect of this, I decided to incorporate Randor's search for his brother, taken from the earliest days of Keldor's history as a Masters of the Universe character. The other main aspect was the idea of a journal of some kind that allowed Randor to "live" his brother's journey. Thus, "Masters of the Universe: The Keldor Chronicles" was born, and began in earnest.

Keldor, the main subject of this exercise, is a character I've loved from the moment I first heard of him. As many Masters of the Universe (MOTU) fans know, Keldor is the man who would eventually become Skeletor, the archrival of He-Man and scourge of all Eternia. This wasn't always the case though. For much of the character's history, Skeletor has simply been just plain old Skeletor. He was originally conceived as a being from "Infinitia" that had crossed dimensions into Eternia and was now obsessed with ruling it (and Castle Grayskull). We never really knew why. The knowledge that Skeletor was really the king's long-lost brother Keldor was a game-changer... or at least it should have been. More on that in a bit.

When I first wrote my original short story in 2000, all we knew of Keldor was from the Mini-Comic, ["The Search for Keldor,"](#) from the original MOTU line of toys. Released in 1986, "The Search for Keldor" told us that King Randor, the father of Prince Adam (He-Man), was looking for his brother, Keldor, who had sought to learn magic and had disappeared. For some reason, Skeletor saw fit to put a stop to the search, because, in his own words, if Randor and the other heroes learned the secret of Keldor, it could "destroy" him. Just when King Randor

thought that he could see his brother through a mystic veil, Skeletor showed up and the ensuing battle ended the search. The sudden actions of Skeletor and his obsession with stopping Randor strongly hinted that Skeletor actually was Keldor.

I did not have the original "The Search for Keldor" mini-comic, but first read it with the release of the commemorative replica series of MOTU figures released at the turn of the century by Mattel. Ever since then, I've been fascinated with the idea of Keldor being Skeletor and thus, the king's brother. This simple fact rekindled my passion for MOTU and it hasn't fizzled out since.

Due to this reborn enthusiasm, I spent a lot of time reading up on what I could find that related to the matter, but frankly, due to the original toy line ending not long after that mini-comic saw release, there wasn't much to find. The one thing that I remember finding was an [interview](#) at He-Man.org with Steven Grant, the man who wrote "The Search for Keldor" mini-comic. He stated in the interview that, *"As far as I remember, Keldor was Skeletor... But, I don't think that was ever going to be revealed... I seem to remember it as one of those things Mattel came up with out of the blue... Slur Keldor and you end up with Skeletor... His back-story wasn't really worked out. Some sort of evil cosmic energies altered him. I think they were going for a Darth Vader thing, but it was a tack-on... The main idea was that if they found out Skeletor was Keldor, they'd be able to find out what had changed him and might find some way to reverse it."* Other than that nugget of "behind the scenes" information, the link between Skeletor and Randor remained a "woulda coulda shoulda" non-revelation. It just never happened.

I thought that that was a huge waste of an opportunity. Skeletor was He-Man's uncle? How was it that this wasn't explored? This, to me, could have revitalized a dying brand that was having serious troubles at the time, but perhaps the decline was inevitable as new properties like the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" were giving He-Man a run for his money in the hearts of the children of the late 1980's. Regardless, I was immediately in love with the notion that Skeletor was this Keldor guy, and more than that, that he was the king's brother. Furthermore, it caused me to wonder: what if Keldor had been the older brother? That would actually give Skeletor a legitimate claim to the throne and give him some much-needed depth. No longer would he be a one-dimensional villain that simply wanted to "rule the world," but someone who had a mission to reclaim what was rightfully theirs. Heck, he didn't even need to be older. If Randor died, Keldor would be the new king. Although some could view it as cliché, the villain being related to the hero worked a bit of classic literature sensibility into MOTU. This is what grabbed me. Just because Keldor should be the rightful king, I didn't think that this revelation would make him a sympathetic character, or less evil. Despite being the "rightful" heir, it didn't automatically make him the right man for the job, so to speak. So, rather than sympathy, I've always thought that it just gave the character some depth.

I felt inspired then to begin working on the first version of my story, the aforementioned short story, then called "Keldor The Cursed: Banished From

Eternia." I knocked it out quickly and was happy with it at the time. So why do I keep coming back to this? Why, even after it was made official in the Mike Young Productions cartoon in the 2000's that Keldor was Skeletor, did I feel the need to continue? Well, for a while, I didn't. I thought that that base had finally been covered. You see, I wasn't able to watch the MYP series as a whole until years after it ended, as I did not have cable at the time. I was living in Miami, FL when the show debuted and sneaked down to the lobby of my apartment building to change the channel on the TV in order to watch the first three episodes, but that was it. I had to wait until the DVD release to see the show in its entirety. This was when I realized, to my dismay, that they still (!) had not tapped the potential that was there. Keldor was Skeletor, sure, and we got to see some awesome flashbacks to his past (not enough for my tastes), but much like the original toy line ended before it could explore the relationship between Keldor and Randor (and, by extension, Adam/He-Man), so too, did the MYP series after its second and final season.

As I watched the series for the first time on DVD, I was shocked to learn that over the course of the show's two seasons, it was never mentioned, even once, that Randor and Keldor were brothers! Keldor was simply a warlord out to rule Eternia as far as viewers knew. Once again, seeds were planted that were sadly never tended and rotted before they had the chance to grow. Perhaps this would have been explained in the third season of the show, but the opportunity had been lost and we were practically back where we started. By this point in time, many fans of the MOTU property knew that Skeletor and Randor were brothers (or half-brothers, as the new show's DVD commentary would confirm), but it still had yet to be acknowledged in any official capacity or story. This would finally happen when Mattel released a Skeletor action figure in the "Masters of the Universe Classics" line of collector figures in 2008. The figure's bio referred to Keldor as Randor's half-brother, officially making Keldor a part of the family.

Since Mattel wasn't giving me what I wanted (a great Keldor story), I decided, due to the aforementioned dinner conversation, to go back and try to make mine better. Looking back at the original 50-page version, it probably wasn't that good. Since that decision in September of 2012, it has since undergone a major overhaul to become "Masters of the Universe: The Keldor Chronicles," which you have just finished reading. Although there have been several attempts to date, we fans still have yet to get a great "official" Keldor story. Hopefully one day we will, but until such time, this will have to suffice. I tried to make "Masters of the Universe: The Keldor Chronicles" engrossing, interesting, and most importantly, fun to read. I know I had fun working on it.

Thanks for your interest and good journey!

-Matt Kayser
February 2013

Thank You:

A huge thanks to my long-suffering wife, Wendy. She's had to hear me rant about Keldor for more than a decade now! She was an invaluable help when it came to working out ideas and story points, and just plain old advice. Without her help, this story would not be what it is. Her editing took a story that I liked and made it a story I love. It now flows in such a way that I am really proud of it. It wouldn't have been the same without her support (and she's not even a MOTU fan, so it means that much more to me). I also owe her for both the first and last lines of the story, which I think are excellent and powerful.

Thanks also to Adam Jay of [Superhero Photography](#). He read the early 50-page version and his enthusiasm for it prompted me to take it and make it better. It's likely that this story would not exist without his excitement for my work inspiring me to make take that series of shorts and make it into the best darn MOTU story I could come up with.

Thank you as well to the various people who read early drafts of "The Keldor Chronicles" in order to help me edit, give me advice and, in most cases, cheer me on. The most prominent of those are my friends Jeffrey Westhoff, Freddie Nova, Adam Jay, and Spencer Voykin. There were a few others that took time out of their busy schedules to help me out, but were unable to read the entire novel due to other commitments. Your advice and support means a lot to me as well. You know who you are and you are much appreciated!

A special thanks goes out to [He-Man.org](#) owner Val Staples for providing me with the link to the old, archived version of the site. This allowed me to rediscover the interview with "The Search for Keldor" author Steven Grant, for which I had scoured the internet for months before Val graciously helped me out. I highly recommend checking out the current site, as it is the most in-depth and greatest MOTU fan site online.

I'd also like to thank Mattias Fahlberg for the awesome cover!

To all of the MOTU fans out there, I appreciate the time you've spent exploring the MOTU world I made for myself and I hope you enjoyed your time there. MOTU would be nothing without its fans and in many ways we keep it alive. I'm glad to be a part of the MOTU fan community!

APPENDIX

One of the things my wife thought that I should do is include an appendix of sorts that lists the things within “The Keldor Chronicles” that are my own creation versus what has already been established. She didn’t realize that much of it was actually invented by me, at least story-wise. Other than some very broad aspects of the characters, the story is my own.

I’m a pretty humble guy and getting credit isn’t high on my list (I’m just happy people are reading my story), but I have to admit that I don’t like the thought of someone who’s not a huge fan of MOTU thinking that I lifted a lot of this story and painted in broad strokes over an existing universe. I definitely didn’t. There are many different versions of MOTU, some complimenting each other, and some contradictory. Mattel has stated time and again that there is no “official MOTU canon.” Because of this confusion, I made my own, just for my own sanity as a fan.

If you are a big MOTU fan, you can probably (and hopefully do) appreciate the amount of work that went into this project. I’m not going to list everything I did different, but I’ll list the main things that I DIDN’T come up with, which seems like less of a task.

Things and places:

The Sword of Darkness and the Sword of Light

Although they operate totally differently and mean totally different things in my story, the name of the swords came from the “Grayskull: The Masters of the Universe” screenplay by Justin Marks that has been floating around online for years (the version I have is dated 5/23/08). The swords themselves, and the splitting of the original Power Sword comes from one of the earliest mini comics, namely “He-Man and the Power Sword” (1981).

The history of Snake Mountain

This is taken from the MYP cartoon, as are the concepts of the **Light and Dark Hemispheres** (though the original series mentions a dark half of the planet).

The Mystic Wall

This concept is from the MYP cartoon (a note from the revised edition: this is actually from some of the original material, specifically a 1985 Golden Book, though I had no idea. Most fans remember it from the MYP cartoon), although its construction, downfall, and pretty much anything else regarding it was my own version.

Eternia

Eternia is, in most of the existing media, the name of both the kingdom and the planet, and I've always thought that was confusing, so I came up with the name of "Tellus" for the planet by searching on Google for "other names for Earth." Simple and I just liked the way it sounded. Sometimes the kingdom itself is referred to as "Eternos," as well. I just combined those ideas by making Eternos Palace the name of Randor and his family's home within the kingdom of Eternia.

Characters:

Keldor/Skeletor

The fact that Keldor betrayed Randor and tried to kill him was in my year 2000 short story years before it was canon.

In my original 2000 version, Keldor was a plain old white dude like Randor, and his skin became blue due to the curse of him living in, essentially, a dead and discolored body. When he was established as a blue guy from the beginning in the MYP cartoon, I liked it and changed it accordingly.

The fact that Keldor learned the dark arts of Sorcery from Hordak was an

original idea when written in the 2000 version. The very end of the original story was when Keldor asks Evelyn (then just Evil-Lyn in the original version) about Hordak, leading to a fairly lame, "And so it begins..." ending (hey, I thought it was cool at the time). Remember, when I wrote the first version of the story, all I had to go on was the "Search for Keldor" mini comic, which told us next to nothing about him. It just got the fans thinking.

The origin of Skeletor in "The Keldor Chronicles" is an original creation. His origin has been told in various ways over the years, but I've never liked any of them. The most famous is from the MYP cartoon in which he is struck in the face with a vial of acid and is later magically "healed" by Hordak, turning him into Skeletor. To be honest, I think that that is rather lame and unimaginative, so I tried to come up with something better. The bios from the MOTUC series also had Hordak merge him with a character called "Demo-Man," but again, I've never liked that. It just seems unnecessary. Despite my feelings on that aspect of the origin, I did work Demo-Man in, albeit in my own way.

The various things that I had in the story about Keldor that became canon are just happy accidents and are of course completely coincidental. I actually think it's pretty cool that most of the general ideas that I had about Keldor were in line with what the creators over at MYP and Mattel had in mind as well.

Evil-Lyn

In the MYP cartoon, Evil-Lyn was a witch who met up with and joined Keldor before he became Skeletor. After he became Skeletor, she repeatedly betrayed him. She was established in the MYP cartoon and comics as the daughter of The Faceless One.

In the 80's cartoon, she revealed to Teela that she had no loyalty to Skeletor and planned to steal away his power once he'd won.

Pretty much everything else about her in my story, like her protecting the Power Sword half, training under both Hordak and the Sorceress Kuduk Ungol, etc. was my attempt at fleshing her out and giving her an interesting reason to join up with Keldor. Officially, she's often portrayed as just a rebellious woman, but I don't think that's very interesting in and of itself. I wanted to give her a reason to do what she does.

Randor

I'm not going to lie to you. I don't know that much about Randor other than that his father's name was Miro. If he has a detailed history anywhere, I don't know it. You can pretty much assume that any other similarities to other, more official versions of him are purely coincidental.

Queen Marlana

Marlana didn't appear enough to warrant changing, although, for the record, I don't like the idea of her being from Earth, which is a concept from the original cartoon series that has been carried over in various other forms of media. I didn't mention it in the story as it wasn't necessary to. If you like the Earth origin, then it is still intact (due to my completely ignoring it).

He-Man/Adam

Most people know the basics of He-Man, so I won't bore you with details. I didn't change him much (why mess with something that's not broken?) although I did create the idea of the "prophecy," as far as I know. Certainly, the "dark child" and "light child" part was my idea. Adam becoming king not only makes sense, but dates back to a cartoon that was pitched but never developed called "Dare: Son of He-Man."

King Grayskull

A creation of the MYP cartoon, King Grayskull isn't really in this story, but what's there about his history is pretty much what has already been established in the episode "The Power of Grayskull."

Man-At-Arms

Other than Duncan being a childhood friend of Randor and the real father of Teela (he's long been her adopted dad in the various media), I didn't change much about our old pal MAA. He was just fine as is, in my opinion.

Teela

Teela is pretty much in this story as she already exists, other than being queen, but that idea dates back to that same failed pitch for the cartoon-that-never-was called “Dare: Son of He-Man.”

Her becoming the new Sorceress has been used in various media dating back to the original cartoon and even one of the original mini comics.

She was established as being the Sorceress’s daughter on the original cartoon (although some media claims that she is, instead, a clone... but, c’mon... that’s lame).

Beast Man

Beast Man isn’t in “The Keldor Chronicles” enough to be changed. The only things I added to his story were his tracking and naming Panthor and that he created Panthor’s saddle.

Mer-Man

Mer-Man being a peaceful king is my idea, but I always felt like he didn’t really like serving Skeletor anyway, so it made sense to me.

Panthor

What do you change about a cat? Well, his being from the Gar homeland was, as far as I’m aware, my creation. His being a “dylinx,” as far as I know, comes from his MOTUC bio. I’m not sure if his breed or species has been referenced in any other form of media.

Battle Cat

Again, what’s to change?

Tri-Klops

Tri-Klops having once been a member of the Eternian Royal Guard was actually conceived by my friend Johnny Bilson, who has portrayed the character in more than one fan-film. I thought it was a brilliant idea and worked it in with his blessing.

The Sorceress (Teela 'Na)

The Sorceress being Teela's mother has long been established, however her giving up Teela as a child in order to take her place as Sorceress of Grayskull was my idea, as was her relationship with Man-At-Arms. I like the idea of sacrificing something for the greater good. The name Teela 'Na is from the original series episode called "Origin of the Sorceress," in which it was shown that she became the Sorceress to protect her planet from the Horde, but I couldn't figure out a logical way to work that into my story and thought that the Horde had already played a big enough role.

The Sorceress (Kuduk Ungol)

Kuduk Ungol appeared in the original series episode called "Origin of the Sorceress" and was established as the Sorceress that preceded Teela 'Na.

Kronis/Trap-Jaw

Kronis being a mercenary dates back to the character's first appearances. His transformation being due to a severe beating from Skeletor comes from the MYP era of comics, although I've never actually read that story. I just liked the idea of it.

All of the Kronis stuff from The Keldor Chronicles, other than the above, is my own creation.

Count Marzo

Count Marzo appeared in both the original cartoon and the MYP cartoon, although the two versions barely resembled each other. The one spoken of in "The Keldor Chronicles" is meant to be taken as the MYP version.

Shokoti

Shokoti is a fan-favorite character from the original cartoon. Shokoti's "secret identity" as the Gar woman "Nira" is my creation. Shokoti being Keldor's mother is not canon, and has never been stated officially in any way, however it is a popular fan theory that I liked, so I worked it in, hopefully in a graceful way.

Hordak

Hordak was always depicted more as a sci-fi villain than anything, but I prefer him to be a powerful sorcerer, so that is the version I went with, ignoring most of the sci-fi stuff (other than the space ships). Hordak being responsible for the creation of the Dark Hemisphere also came from the MYP cartoon, as far as I'm aware.

Adora/Despara

Adora was shown in the animated movie "He-Man & She-Ra: Secret of the Sword" to have been kidnapped as a child by Hordak and raised as his daughter. The "Despara" identity is actually a very recent invention of DC comics, and since I liked it so much, I used it. It's pretty much the only concept from the DC series to have worked its way into "The Keldor Chronicles." The reasons for this are, 1 - most of "Chronicles" was written before the DC books came out, and 2 - I don't really like the DC comics, aside from the Despara identity, to be honest.

As an aside, you are probably wondering why there is no She-Ra in "Chronicles," when Adora plays such an important role (whether she's present or not). It's mainly because it wasn't necessary for the story, but I also could not reconcile the She-Ra sword, as it didn't fit into the original mini-comic mythology of the Power Sword. That's not to say that I don't know exactly what happens to Adora after "The Keldor Chronicles" ends, though...

Catra

I didn't really change anything about Catra. Though I am not too familiar with the Princess of Power property, I know that Catra became Force Captain after Adora left and became She-Ra and I find that to be really interesting.

Shadow Weaver

I like the idea of Shadow Weaver being Adora's adoptive "mother," and wanted to work it into "Chronicles." It turned out that she apparently played that role on the "She-Ra: Princess of Power" cartoon as well in the early episodes. Another happy accident.

Demo-Man (the Demon of Despondos/The Nameless One)

Demo-Man is actually a concept character that was proposed as the villain of the MOTU line, before Skeletor was created. As I mentioned above, he's been worked into the MOTUC storyline bios as a being that bonded with Keldor to become Skeletor, but I think that's silly. I did like the idea of his being involved, however, so I worked him into "The Keldor Chronicles" in my own way.

The Nameless One has long been linked to Keldor's transformation into Skeletor, but it was a story that never saw the light of day. I wanted to work The Nameless One into the story as a way to honor that concept. The fact that he's called that because no one can pronounce his name (Uqquz' Zekul-Mshqx) is just something that I thought would be funny. Hopefully fans appreciate the humor in it.

King Miro

I have to admit complete ignorance regarding King Miro. Anything in "The Keldor Chronicles" that relates to Randor's father is my own creation.

Shadow Beasts, Ram Man, Stratos, and Mekaneck

These are from the original cartoon and haven't really been changed.

In summary:

I hope that the above goes to show just how much I tried to stay true to the original characters in "The Keldor Chronicles," while also showing how much of the story was my original creation. Sure, I didn't change the core characters much, but the story and most of what it entails came from my own geeky mind, and makes up my own "personal canon." MOTU, to me, has always had great characters, but not a lot of great stories using them. There has always been a ton of potential,

however. Many of the story's pieces were there, but were simplified or long neglected, in my opinion. I just picked them up, fleshed them out, and did something with them. I hope you enjoyed what I came up with.

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 (naturally).

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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