

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

THE POWER OF GRAYSKULL



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PROLOGUE

D'Vann Grayskull grunted in pain as he stumbled over a large rock, violently crashing to the floor of the cave. The leanly-muscled teen stood up once more, brushing the dirt and mud from his bloody knees. His long blonde hair stuck to his face, the moisture of the cave and his own perspiration combining to form a grimy sheen on his skin. Thankful that the torch he carried remained lit despite his fall, the youth raised it up and continued his descent. The surrounding tribes called this the Cave of Power and tales had long been told of the treasure that awaited any who survived to the end of the journey through its winding passages. Most believed the stories to be mere legends, but D'Vann had faith that they were true. After his parents had been killed by their Snake Men captors, D'Vann had escaped the slave colony he'd been born into. He'd spent the next year on the run, wandering the untamed lands. It seemed that in every town, indeed in every tavern, he'd heard tales of men who had attempted to reach the treasure, same as he did now. These men either disappeared forever, or returned, but irreparably changed and overcome with an uncontrollable fear. The stories claimed that those who had returned bore scars from an animal's claws, given to them by a brutal beast that guarded the treasure. Whether it was the naivety of youth, or merely stupidity, D'Vann did not fear the mysterious creature, for he knew he had the goddess Zoar on his side.

His parents had prayed to Serpos daily, begging the god of the Snake Men to spare them from their slavery. Their prayers had gone unheeded. D'Vann would

have to be a fool to trust in Serpos. No, he had his own god, the one his people would have worshipped, had they not been enslaved long ago. Freedom is all that D'Vann had craved during his childhood, slaving his youth away in the Snake Men's camp. Eventually he had prayed to the gods, any god other than Serpos, to free him. By the next new moon, he had escaped in the night. Throughout his wanderings after his escape, he had come upon a cave wall, not unlike one he would find here. Upon it, he had found his ancient ancestors' paintings telling the story of Zoar, the goddess his people once revered, before they'd foolishly turned their backs on her. A green falcon, Zoar was the goddess of life, of flight and of living free. The moment he saw the paintings, he knew that it must have been Zoar who'd freed him. At that moment, he'd pledged himself to her, apologizing for the foolishness of his people for forsaking her, but swearing that he would not repeat their mistake.

Zoar had been long-ignored by his tribe; their centuries-long servitude to the Snake Men causing them to forget her truth long ago. In time, she became nothing more than a story told to children, her people's devotion stolen by Serpos, a god who surely had no interest in human affairs. It had sickened D'Vann to travel the lands after his escape, seeing the human clans praising Serpos, worshiping the three-headed serpentine god of their rulers as if he were their own. In his heart, D'Vann felt sorry for them. They were lost. Serpos was strong in this age, that was undeniable, but he would not hear the prayers of D'Vann's people. He was not their god. D'Vann had renounced Serpos, though he had to be mindful not to show his heretical beliefs around others, lest they turn on him and alert their serpentine masters. He wondered at times if Zoar minded his secrecy? She had his faith, but what good was faith when one kept it hidden?

Running his hand through his long hair, the youth brushed the dirtied strands out of his face as he continued ever downward, deeper into the cave and ever closer to his goal. How long had he been here? Hours? Surely. Days? Perhaps, he conceded. He'd run out of food long enough ago that his stomach ached fiercely. Closing his eyes, he shook away his fears. Zoar would keep him strong. He was almost there, he could feel it. Sure enough, a quarter of an hour later, he'd reached the end of the tunnel: a small crevice leading to the unknown that lay beyond. He turned sideways and squeezed through the narrow passage, stumbling briefly as he emerged into a large cavern. D'Vann found that the cavern was dimly lit by a phosphorescent glow coming from the fungus that lined its interior. The young wanderer could hear running water, accompanied by the rhythmic dripping of moisture from the cave's ceiling. The chill of the falling drops caused his flesh to react, quickly goose-pimpling from the shock of the cold moisture coming into contact with his hot and exhausted body.

He made his way to a small stream that ran through the cave and began to follow it, feeling his steps taking him upward, ever upward, once again climbing toward the surface. Turning a corner, he caught sight of a faint light in the distance, far from that of his torch and much brighter than the glow given off by the fungus-lined walls. It had to be daylight, he reasoned; a way out. Making his way toward the newly discovered light source, he found to his joy that it was indeed an opening to the crisp air of the outside world; an escape from the despair he was beginning to feel inside the system of caves that had sought to become his tomb. Walking through the wide mouth that formed the exit, D'Vann looked down upon a large valley, surrounded by mountains that hid it from the world he knew; the world beyond the tunnels at his back. Carefully, he walked toward the center of the valley, feeling inexorably drawn toward it as a moth to a flame. The valley was made up of a dense jungle. Creatures he heard but never saw skittered away from him as he fumbled through the trees and underbrush. After nearly an hour traversing the distance with much difficulty, D'Vann came upon an open area in the middle of the valley and the natural spring that bubbled at its center. A lone tree grew out of the ground next to it, huge and vibrant. "This must be it," he said aloud. "The Font of Life."

Making his way closer to the spring he sought, he stopped suddenly, his ears perking at the sound of a low growl coming from the jungle behind him. The youth turned slowly, not wanting to make any sudden moves. The brush swayed in the distance, parting as something large and presumably dangerous made its way toward him. As D'Vann watched in silence, the creature causing the brush to shake and sway moved closer and closer to where he stood. He couldn't move, but he couldn't stay where he was, either. The youth took a step back, only to hear a loud snap as he stepped on a dried twig, cast off from a nearby fallen branch. Thinking of the beast he'd heard even the hardest men speak of with fear in their voices, he looked up hastily, but the brush had stopped moving. Whatever it was that hid within, it was now as aware of him as he was of it.

After seconds that felt like hours passed, the brush moved once more, the final line of it that separated D'Vann from the jungle parting to allow passage of the largest lion he had ever seen. Long tusks hung from its mouth, indicating that it was somehow crossbred with the more common sabretooth tigers that D'Vann had long had to avoid during his travels in the untamed lands. *Ligors are myth*, he reassured himself silently. Despite the thought, there it stood before him, easily twice the size of any giant cat he'd seen previously, muscular, and most definitely real. Green in color, the ligor shook its copious mane as it freed itself of the foliage of the jungle and stepped toward him in a loping, lazy pace. It obviously did not view the lean young man as a threat. Carefully, D'Vann pulled a makeshift knife

from his belt that he'd carved from a stone during his journeys. Compared to the ligor's tusks, it felt about as comforting to D'Vann as a nail would to a warrior in lieu of a sword. *Perhaps this creature has itself sipped of the font?* he thought suddenly. *Such a thing would explain its spectacular size and would mean that the myths surrounding the font are true!* With a sense of realization and renewed hope for survival, D'Vann turned and sprinted toward the spring, making his way as fast as he could manage. Hearing a roar at his back, he found himself running even faster, but within seconds a swipe of the ligor's paw knocked him viciously to the side, his small knife lost to the tall grasses. He slammed into the ground with surprising force and instinctively rolled into a ball. The massive beast circled him, occasionally coming closer and pushing at his body with its giant paw, toying with him as his domesticated cousins would a field mouse. *I'm as good as dead,* D'Vann thought.

Opening his eyes, he found himself nearly eye to eye with the creature, which rumbled with a low growl and shook its mane at him in response. Raising his gaze further upward, D'Vann caught sight of a bird circling high above him, gliding almost casually on the warm jungle breeze. *Already waiting to feed off my corpse,* D'Vann thought. *I hope you choke, you old buzzard.*

Even after I granted you your freedom? The voice D'Vann heard inside of his mind was not his own. Inexplicably, yet undeniably, it was a woman's.

"Who are you?" he asked aloud. The bird screeched and the ligor suddenly stepped back, laying down nearby. D'Vann thought absentmindedly that it appeared as if the beast was doing so out of respect. The bird landed on a low branch of the impossibly large tree growing near the spring. No longer backlit by the bright noonday sun, D'Vann's eyes widened with wonder as he saw that it was a green falcon. "Zoar?" he asked cautiously. He raised himself to his knees and bowed his head low to the ground.

Rise and drink from the font, the voice in his mind said.

D'Vann stood slowly, his legs shaking with fear. As far as he knew, no one had ever drunk from the font successfully. "You offer this to me? Why?"

Because you remembered me, the voice replied. *You are not the only one who has located the Font of Life, but you will be the first to harness its power. All others have sought it for selfish reasons, but not you. I see inside your heart, D'Vann Grayskull. I know why you seek its gifts. Unlike the others, you are a worthy investment; chosen by me to be more than just yourself. Drink, and you will have your heart's desire. You will be a leader of men. You will be my champion.*

"I don't understand," he replied.

You will in time. Trust in Zoar.

Taking careful steps, his eyes watching the falcon closely, D'Vann made his way to the spring. His glance back toward the massive liger often as he walked, but the creature merely bathed in the sun, apparently no longer interested in him. Reaching the crystal-clear waters of the font, D'Vann lowered himself to his knees at its bank. He looked once again to the goddess Zoar to make sure he wasn't merely imagining her, delirious from the days he'd spent in the caves, but the green falcon remained on the branch and jutted its beak toward him, encouraging him to continue. Submerging his hands into the spring, he was surprised at the warmth of its waters. D'Vann pulled his hands from the font, the nourishing liquid cupped within them. Before bringing it to his mouth, he paused. "I'm afraid," he admitted. "This power, does it come with a price? I will never again be a slave." He looked to the falcon once more. "Not even yours."

I ask only that you live your life freely, the voice said. Do this and one day I will call upon you. Perhaps then you will serve me by choice, for the betterment of your people.

"Then I will await that day with immense pride," D'Vann said. Slowly, he brought the water to his mouth and drank. The liquid's warmth filled him as he swallowed, spreading throughout his extremities with a strong tingling sensation. He could already feel the font's power flowing through his body, changing it forever. With it, his fear faded. He had been right to choose Zoar as his goddess, and he would in turn prove her right in choosing him. He would be her champion, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Eight Years Later

The rain pelted Grayskull and his liger companion Granger as they walked toward the village tavern. The heavy droplets hit the wet ground so hard that the sound resembled falling coins. If only, for Grayskull always seemed to be in need of them. The noise of the carousing emanating from the ground floor of the village's most notorious inn/tavern grew even louder as the wanderer shoved open the run-down building's double doors. A hulk of a man, covered in muscle, D'Vann shook his wild mane of hair as he entered, sending rainwater about the room, along with that which dripped from his thick, furred cloak. Granger did likewise as the massive beast padded in through the door at his back. The men sitting nearest the entrance

cursed as the newcomers' expelled water splattered on their dinners. Each man began to stand angrily, but with one look at Grayskull and his ligor, they did nothing, instead returning to their seated positions in silence.

"Hey, you can't bring that beast in here," the innkeeper shouted at Grayskull from behind the bar.

D'Vann glanced behind the man at the bar to see a statue of Serpos, the three-headed snake god and his apostle, King Hiss, who still ruled these lands, having done so for nearly three hundred years. Nothing much had changed in the time since D'Vann had drunk from the Font of Life. Nothing but himself; the lanky teenager he'd once been now no more than a ghost, and he no longer feared snakes. "He's not a beast," he argued, smiling wryly as he did so. "He's my spirit guide!" Saying the words, D'Vann erupted into boisterous laughter.

"Spirit guide or no, he's soaking wet and he stinks," the man protested, cutting D'Vann short.

Grayskull waved his hand dismissively. "Much like everyone else in this stinking village. Do us a favor and shut it, Thuldor. He's one of your best customers." He hung his rain-soaked cloak on a hook near the entrance. "As am I."

The man huffed. "You drank nearly my entire supply of mead the last time you were in the village, Grayskull. And your blasted cat ate half my stores of salted swine on top of that, which you still owe me sixty rubits for, I might add!" The innkeeper's voice raised as he grew more and more irritated. "Now get that beast out of here!" he shouted.

D'Vann calmly walked to his usual table, in the back corner of the tavern, and sat. Granger followed, lying down on the floor at his friend's side before beginning a long bath. "You're more than welcome to carry him out, if you'd like. In fact, it'd be a joy to see you make the attempt. You're about his size. Portion-wise, I mean." The smile that rested comfortably on his face clearly showed that the wanderer wouldn't waver.

The innkeeper remained behind the bar and stared at Grayskull, but remained silent for a long moment. "Fine," the man said at last, exasperated. "I'll put it on your tab. Your usual, then?"

"Of course, you old fool," D'Vann replied heartily, reaching down to gently pet Granger's head, still wet from the rain. The innkeeper approached cautiously due to the presence of the giant cat and placed a large wooden bowl on Grayskull's

table. Having brought a bottle of mead with him, the man pulled its cork and began to pour it into the bowl before D'Vann grabbed his wrist. "Leave it," he commanded. "And bring another." With a scowl, the innkeeper did so before returning to the bar and tending to other customers, most of which tried to ignore the barbarian in their midst. More than one changed tables in an effort to stay away from him. Grayskull was fine with their shunning him, however. *Serpos-worshipping* filth, he thought. He wasn't here to make friends.

D'Vann placed the bowl on the floor for Granger to lick clean. Taking the bottle in his massive hand, he smiled. "To the glory of Zoar!" he shouted loud enough for everyone in the tavern to hear. Turning to Granger, his voice grew quiet. "Wherever she may be." He then proceeded to drink the entire bottle in a continuous series of gulps before slamming it down and letting out a loud belch. He looked toward Granger once more, his comrade loudly slurping the bowl of mead before him. Grayskull's voice remained low as he rubbed the beast behind its ears. "Because you and I both know that no matter how much I pray, she never answers." Smiling faintly at his only companion, he raised the second bottle to him in toast. "And here's to the power of Grayskull, her forgotten champion."

PART I

THE THREE TOWERS

1.

THE WARNING

The sky flashed with lightning. Massive quakes violently shook everything the eye could see. King Adam of Eternia looked on helplessly as avalanches of snow, boulders and earth tumbled from the mountains in the distance to the plains at their base, burying the outlying villages of his kingdom along with their inhabitants. A crack of thunder drowned out Adam's scream of despair as, unable to help them, he witnessed the deaths of hundreds of his subjects. He no longer had the power of Grayskull. He-Man no longer, he was now just a man, helpless to stop the destruction around him. The long, slow rumble of the aftershock that followed shook the ground beneath his feet, knocking him to his hands and knees. The beleaguered king gazed skyward and was forced to shield his eyes as the angry clouds above him opened, pelting his body and everything around him with a drenching rain. Adam lowered his eyes to the ground and he shivered visibly at the sight before him. Surrounding him, and continuing as far as he could see, were bodies; those of both his allies and his enemies.

A great battle had been fought here; a battle that was clearly over. He caught sight of the victor standing in front of Castle Grayskull, the structure looming before Adam like a ghost from his past. The victor was a creature born of nightmares, his

scalloped red cape whipping about violently in the winds that began to rage around them both. The manifestation of evil itself stood tall and proud atop countless corpses. The closest to the creature's feet was Adora, Adam's twin sister, as lifeless as the rest of Adam's friends and allies that littered the battlefield. The king tried to stand, but slipped and fell on the bodies. He held his hands in front of his face and saw that they were red and glistening. Adam realized with dawning horror that it wasn't rain that the sky had loosed upon him; it was blood. Chilling laughter filled the air as the creature before him tilted its head back and raised its hands to the sky. With an indescribable sound, a tear appeared in the air before him, a rip through reality itself. The space within it contained nothing but darkness. In seconds, the darkness spread until it was all that remained, pervasive, unstoppable, and Adam knew in that briefest of moments that he had failed.

Adam awoke with a start, sweat pouring from his forehead. The sheets of the bed were damp and stuck to his back as he sat up. Beside him, Eternia's queen lay undisturbed. He could make out the shape of his young son Dare at the foot of the bed, the dim candlelight of the room highlighting the tears that flowed down the boy's cheeks. "Papa," the boy whispered in an effort to not wake his mother, "I had a bad dream."

Adam laid back down and reached his arms out for his son. Dare climbed in beside him, quickly wrapping his arms around his father, searching for comfort. "It's alright, Son. Sometimes your papa has bad dreams, too."

The boy looked up at his father lovingly, his eyes still glistening. "You do?" he asked, astonished.

"Sure I do, but they're nothing to be afraid of, especially yours."

"Because I have you to protect me?" Dare asked quietly.

Adam couldn't help but think of his own dream. He was haunted by the sight of his sister's body among the dead, of the endless corpses that stretched as far as his eyes could see, and of how helpless he'd felt at having not been able to save them. He tried to sound confident, despite being shaken by the experience. "Yes, Dare. I'll always protect you."

"I know," Dare said, his own confidence clear in his voice. "What was your dream about?" the boy asked.

"A battle."

"A big one?" Dare pressed, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. Raised in a time of planet-wide peace, the boy couldn't help but be intrigued by the idea of war. He was far too young to understand the horrors it wrought.

"Yes, son, a big one," Adam answered.

"Did you win, Papa?"

He shook his head in response. "No. I don't think so."

"Oh." Dare paused, thinking. "Well, then you know it was just a dream," he said with a smile. "You always win."

"I wish that were true," Adam sighed. "So, tell me, what was yours about?"

"I dreamt of a great big castle."

"Oh, really? Is that what scared you?"

"Yes," Dare said, "at least at first. I was afraid when I saw it. It wasn't like here. It was really old and looked like a skeleton."

Adam felt his brow furrow. "Like a skeleton? Do you mean that it had something like a skull on the front?"

Dare paused in an effort to remember. "Yes. A giant one."

"What else happened?" Adam asked.

"The door was open, so I went in. It seemed a lot bigger on the inside, too. I thought that was very strange. Then I saw a lady sitting on a throne."

"What did she look like?"

"Like a bird," Dare replied.

"A bird?" Adam asked with a knowing smile. Perhaps Dare's grandmother had paid him a visit through the Everdream. With the Sorceress of Grayskull as the boy's grandmother, Adam knew it was only a matter of time before something of this nature happened. Dare had always had a special connection to the magic that surrounded them.

"Yes," his son answered. "A bird."

Adam put on a confused face, intent to play along as if he didn't know exactly who his son was speaking of. "Well, was she nice?"

"Oh yes, Papa. She hugged me and then I wasn't so afraid anymore."

Adam smiled once again. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"No, that part wasn't," Dare answered. "It was nice, but then the castle started to shake and a man appeared, a really scary man."

"A scary man?" Adam asked with some concern. "What did he look like?"

Dare's eyes grew wide with fear. "He looked like a monster with a face like a bat. He had sharp teeth and wore a big red cape. He knocked the bird lady down to the ground and she couldn't get back up, no matter how much I tried to help her."

Going off Dare's description, the 'scary man' his son spoke of had to be Hordak, Adam realized, a feeling of dread settling in the pit of his stomach. Knowing this, he found himself holding his son closer, tight to his chest, before easing up. "Don't worry, Dare." He paused, thinking it odd that they both would dream of that creature on the same night, especially since Dare had never seen an image of the vile Horde leader and could have had no idea what he looked like. There was no way it was coincidence. "It was just a dream," he said. Though he was happy that his son felt safe in his arms and was soon asleep, Adam couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding that he'd not felt in years. Their dreams seemed like a warning; but of what?

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The following morning, Adam woke up groggily. He'd spent most of the night lying awake in bed, his mind trying to make sense of his dream. It had felt like the end of the world. In the years since reuniting the two halves of the Sword of Power, the Eternian king had finally gotten used to the idea of no longer being He-Man, of no longer being the strongest man in the universe. In these past years of peace, being the ruler of a powerful kingdom and a founding member of the Council of Kings had been enough, however Adam feared that that was no longer the case. His dream had brought back a feeling of dread that he'd not felt since immediately after losing his ability to transform into Eternia's guardian. The sense of helplessness that had pervaded his consciousness as he saw the dead surrounding him had shaken him to his core, and the feeling of weakness that it had brought hadn't left with his waking. That haunting dream had felt incredibly real, as if it were not a dream at all, but rather a premonition, an omen of things to come.

Dare was still asleep, now held close in his mother's arms. Adam wondered if the boy would tell Teela of his dream, or would she remain unaware of her mother's nighttime visitation to their son? He would be sure to ask her later, but for now he couldn't bear to wake her up. She looked so happy, Dare held tight to her chest. The birth of their son had changed their lives more than either of them could have ever prepared for. The early years had been the most demanding, but Teela had taken to being a mother with the same level of natural grace that she had always shown as a warrior. Once captain of the royal guard, Teela had resigned from her position to raise Dare, with their mutual friend Mekaneck taking over in her stead. She continued to train regularly and Adam would still not hesitate to trust her with his life in battle. She may be more concerned with being a mother these days but she would always remain a warrior at heart. Likewise, her father Duncan, the Eternian Man-At-Arms, had spent the last few years training his replacement, a relative newcomer named Raenius. The old soldier was having a harder time letting go of his post than his daughter however, and Adam felt that Duncan would hold it until he met his end. Adam certainly wasn't going to take it away from him. Aged or not, Duncan was still the best there was at what he did.

Climbing out of bed gently so as not to awaken his wife and son, Adam walked with careful, quiet steps to his wardrobe. From it, he removed a blue tunic and a pair of black leather trousers, putting them on before slipping on his boots and electronic forearm bracers. The left bracer contained a holo-communicator designed, like so many other things, by his father-in-law Duncan. Adam saw that he had a message, but it could wait a bit longer. Having an influx of messages and concerns came with being king. Once, he'd been unsure as to whether or not he could handle the responsibility of being king, but it had now been nearly a decade since Adam's father Randor had abdicated the throne and it was a burden that Adam had become accustomed to. Also, having Randor back after an entire year spent imprisoned inside the Horde's home base was a blessing, and it more than made up for any hardships Adam had to contend with as the ruler of his kingdom. Though Randor was often far from Eternia, relishing his new role as ambassador, he was never more than a holocommunication away.

In truth, things had gone fairly smoothly since the formation of the Council of Kings. Formed about a year after Dare's birth, the Council was comprised of leaders from the world over in a show of much-needed solidarity in the face of possible global threat. Adam hadn't spent much time in Etheria, the battle-worn planet Hordak used as his home base, but he'd been there long enough to know that he would do anything to prevent such a fate from befalling his home planet of Tellus. That including trying to foster and maintain peace amongst the various kingdoms and tribes that called it home, which was the primary function of the

Council of Kings. The various council members had of course had disagreements over the years, and tensions between himself and his uncle Keldor ran high at times. Adam, as He-Man, and Keldor, as Skeletor, had feuded for nearly a decade before the formation of the council and the two long-time enemies were often at odds with how they should handle certain issues. Compromise was the core of how the Council worked, however, and both had acquiesced at various times to serve the greater good. It had actually been Adam's idea to include Keldor on the Council, and it was necessary. The group could not exclude any world leader or royalty that wished to be involved. To do so would damage the integrity of the council itself and went against the entire purpose of its existence. Despite the occasional bump in the road, the Council could be called nothing if not a success, leading the world to more than a half-decade of peace.

Adam opened the door to the royal bedchambers as silently as possible and stepped out into the hallway. He raised his left arm and pressed the flashing button on his bracer he'd so far ignored. A holo-message from Mekaneck began to play as the king made his way toward the throne room. "Good morning, Adam. Well, I trust that by the time you see this, it'll be morning, anyway. It's late as I'm recording. You know how I get when something scientifically interesting happens. I don't want to wake you as I'm not sure that it's worth investigating in person, but when you get a minute please come see me in the council chamber. We've been getting some strange reports from the outlying villages about 'ghost buildings' or something like that. It's prime season for the vineyards to break out the wines, so I'm not sure how serious we should take this stuff, but," he laughed as he trailed off, "well, you know. There's not much else going on these days, so it's something." His friend smiled with a slight shrug as the message ended.

Adam wasn't sure what to make of it. Ghost buildings? What did that even mean? He didn't know, but changed course and made his way to the council chamber to see if Mekaneck could clarify what he was talking about. Adam's old friend wasn't the only one who seemed almost frustrated by the lack of activity that would come to define the peaceful years they'd been enjoying. Despite growing up during an earlier time of peace afforded to them by the formation of the Mystic Wall, after nearly a decade of constant war with Skeletor and his forces after its destruction, even Adam had to admit that it almost felt unnatural to have a lasting peace following the war's end. He was grateful for it of course, and more than pleased that Dare had grown up so far without experiencing war, but thinking back to last night's dream, Adam couldn't help but fear that that peace may be nearing its end.

The mechanical door to the council chamber slid open with a soft hiss of air. As he entered the large room, Adam's thoughts drifted back to a day he'd come

here with Teela in their youth; the day that the Mystic Wall had fallen. It seemed so long ago now, but he remembered the events that had transpired on that day vividly. The wall's destruction had been the catalyst for his becoming He-Man and thus had started the most important era of his life's journey prior to becoming a father, but it had also signified the return of evil and the death of peace. Adam felt an eerie similarity between that fateful day and this one and was afraid that history was repeating itself. Perhaps he was overreacting to what would turn out to be nothing more than a simple dream, but with a life touched by magic, Adam knew that it was rare for something like the dream he had had to be something simple. The fact that his son Dare's dream had occurred the same night as his could be no coincidence either, nor was the one thing that both dreams had in common: Hordak.

Adam had long been grateful that he and his family had escaped the Fright Zone without having to have a confrontation with Hordak himself. Their coming face-to-face with the Horde leader had seemed inevitable during their escape, but apparently Hordak had placed far too much faith in his lieutenant Shadow Weaver, not to mention the loyalties of Adam's sister Adora. The possibility of Hordak's adopted daughter betraying him had likely not even entered the Horde leader's thoughts, yet that was what had happened in the end. Hordak had underestimated the power that love and the promise of a real family could have over Adora and her brainwashing and Hordak certainly didn't predict the effect that the revealing of his lies would have on her. Adam knew that without his sister's help, his mission to rescue his father would surely have ended much differently. He owed Adora more than she would ever understand, not to mention Evelyn, who had gotten Adam to Etheria in the first place. His dream of Hordak's victory, the foul creature standing tall upon a mountain of the dead that included Adora and the rest of Adam's family, would haunt him for some time and he would do whatever it took to ensure that the events of that dream would never come to pass. He would do anything to protect his family.

Adam entered the council chamber expecting to find at least of few of his royal guardsmen or other Masters, those with enhanced powers who served the kingdom, there with Mekaneck, but instead found his friend standing alone at the far end of the chamber, gazing intently upon a monitor that surveyed the outside walls of the capital city. "Anything of interest, old friend?" Adam asked as he approached.

"No, Sire." Mekaneck turned with a shrug. "There's nothing to report as far as the capital goes." The Captain of the Guard stood a head shorter than Adam, most of his face hidden behind what most would mistake for goggles and a helmet, but both were in reality a permanent fixture. His visible mouth and strong jaw usually carried a smile and though he was often quiet and introspective, Adam knew

that Mekaneck was a positive and cheerful person, despite the circumstances that had caused his disfigurement. A childhood friend of Adam's, the man known only to his closest friends as 'Orius' had suffered an injury on the battlefield many years ago. The warrior's head and neck had been irreparably damaged and the wounds had necessitated Duncan performing emergency surgery. While he saved Orius's life, the Eternian Man-At-Arms had also had to infuse his neck with nano-technology to survive. This same technology allowed him to stretch his neck great distances, a talent that earned him ridicule from time-to-time. However, combined with the vision-enhancing goggles of Duncan's design, that talent had also made Orius invaluable when it came to reconnaissance. He took on the codename 'Mekaneck' and had continued to serve Eternia ever since. "The capital city hasn't changed much over the years," his friend continued. "It's what lies beyond the walls that's interesting. Apparently, old buildings, long-destroyed, are suddenly back. The thing is, you can see through them, and you can't touch them."

"I mean no offense, Orius, but that sounds ridiculous," Adam replied.

"I thought so, too. Until I saw this image from the village of Dustwind." Mekaneck gave Adam a mischievous grin as he pulled up a holovid recorded by one of his flying drones. Dustwind was a small village, near the base of Stone Mountain. During the reign of Adam's grandfather, it had been the home of a tyrant, whose castle was able to be seen for miles. When the tyrant's regime fell, so too did his castle, but in the holovid that Adam was watching, the castle stood once more, though in an admittedly apparitional-looking form.

Upon seeing it, the king understood why the villagers had called it a 'ghost building.' It was a transparent blue, the ground surrounding it covered in a gray fog. "So even your robotic drone was able to see it?" Adam asked.

"Yes, surprisingly. That's very strange," he replied. I can't say that I have an answer as to why, either."

"Well, it proves that it can't just be the ravings of a few old drunks," Adam said, his interest piquing. "If even your technology can see it, then there really is something happening, perhaps something scientific rather than magical."

"Yes, and the Dustwind report isn't the only one we've received," Mekaneck said, "but it is the one I've gotten the most frequently, from many different witnesses. The castle comes and goes apparently, but when it appears, it scares the locals out of their boots, especially the ones that remember the stories of what happened there." Mekaneck turned off the holovid and smiled. "So," he paused, "interested?"

Adam nodded. "Very. I've never seen anything like it. Has anyone been injured investigating these phenomena?"

"No," Mekaneck replied. "I don't think very many people are interested in getting too close to them, to be honest. Most of the people reporting seeing it are simple farmers and more than a little superstitious, so there've been no reports of injuries or anything negative at all, unless you count bad vibes."

"I've had a few of those myself lately," Adam admitted.

"Really?" Mekaneck asked. "Anything that the captain of your royal guard should know about?"

"No," Adam said. "At least not yet. It's just a feeling. I'm happy to hear that no one has been injured. Let's try to keep it that way when we show up." Adam left a message for his wife letting her know that he and Mekaneck were traveling to Dustwind to investigate some strange reports. He didn't mention the ghost castle or any of his other worries. He'd be sure to give her more specifics later, and in person. They weren't likely to be gone long, anyway. He just wanted to see this phenomena in person. After sending the message, Adam and Mekaneck made their way to a Wind Raider and set out for the base of Stone Mountain, curious as to what exactly was going on.

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Climbing out of the Wind Raider near the quaint village, Adam was struck momentarily speechless by the ghostly structure that loomed over them. Like peering through a window into the past, the spectral castle appeared as if it were trapped between two dimensions. The castle was clearly visible, but appeared almost as if it were a hologram. It was transparent, with only a slight opacity making it visible at all, and if Mekaneck's devices hadn't been able to see it just as clearly as the naked eye, Adam would have surmised that it was some sort of trick of the light. "Well, that's definitely something I've never seen before," the king remarked.

"No kidding." Mekaneck grinned as he began walking toward the structure. "Let's get closer." While not as tech-savvy as Duncan, Mekaneck was no slouch himself, primarily due to the upkeep of his own cybernetic augmentations. Over the years, his interest in mechanics had only increased. Having known Orius since they were boys, Adam also knew that his friend had always had a fascination with ghosts, the afterlife, and other things that people often believed in, but remained

unexplained or unproven. Judging by the look of glee on the man's face, Adam couldn't help but return his friend's smile. He fondly remembered the mischief the two of them would get up to whenever they escaped the watchful eye of the slightly-older Teela, who had often been entrusted with keeping an eye on Adam when he'd been a young prince. Taking in the apparition before them, Mekaneck seemed as giddy as a schoolboy and Adam had to admit that he felt a bit like a boy again himself upon seeing his friend so happy.

Despite his eagerness, Mekaneck's steps slowed as he neared the bizarre structure. The villagers, who had been huddled within their homes due to a fear of the building, began to emerge, their confidence bolstered by the appearance of their king. Adam silently reminded himself that they were afraid and made sure to wipe the smile from his face. He certainly didn't want to make it seem as if their concerns meant nothing to him. Fond memories aside, this was indeed a strange occurrence that needed to be investigated. Mekaneck remained blissfully ignorant to the villagers, however, and continued grinning like a young child who was doing something that he knew he wasn't supposed to.

"Has His Majesty come to deliver us from this evil?" an elderly woman asked Adam as she approached his right side.

The king gave her a comforting smile. "We're merely investigating. There have been similar reports from other villages, but they've all been more benign. I've come to Dustwind because I know that your village's particular occurrence has unsettled you."

A farmer, who Adam assumed was the woman's son spoke up. "And we thank you for that, Milord, but are you saying that you cannot rid us its foul presence?"

"We don't yet understand its sudden re-emergence, but I assure you that if we can find a way to stop this apparition, we will. The last thing I want is for you to live in fear of this spectral place." He clapped the man on his right shoulder gently. "If you'll excuse us."

The man nodded quickly, "Of course, Milord. Forgive me if I spoke out of turn. I'm concerned for my mother. Her heart is weak and I'm afraid her fear will be too much for it."

Adam gave the man a warm smile. "No need to ask forgiveness. It's concern for your village that brings us here. That being said, I'm sure there's nothing to fear. It appears to be a ghost and nothing more." With that, Adam and Mekaneck approached the spectral castle.

Mekaneck scanned it with one of his instruments, but turned to Adam with a simple shrug. "I'm not getting anything." With a nod from Adam, his friend walked to the castle door and reached toward it, his hand passing through it with no resistance. With a grin, Mekaneck stepped through the closed door and into the structure. Adam soon followed, feeling nothing but a slight sensation of cold as he passed through the echo of a door that was no longer there. Mekaneck tried to ascend the castle steps, but his foot passed through to the dirt below. Apparently, their exploration would be limited to the ground floor. Taking in his surroundings, the closest thing that Adam could compare the castle to visually was if the structure had been built of blue-tinted glass. Even while inside the building, they could see the villagers watching them through the walls, many of their mouths agape at the spectacle of their king entering the foreboding ghost-like keep. Adam didn't sense any life to the building and judging by his friend's expression, Adam assumed that Mekaneck's scanning equipment continued to tell the same story. Other than the image of the castle surrounding them, their being inside appeared to be no different than being outside when it came to the equipment readings. By all accounts, it was a ghost from the past and nothing more.

It was times like this that made Adam miss the Sorceress of Grayskull even more. For years, she had been his guide and mentor. If she were still alive, he would immediately go and visit her, expecting that she would know exactly what was happening across his kingdom. He had faith that she would have known what these buildings were, and why they were here. With her gone, Adam relied on those he had left, and other than Evelyn, none of them were as in tune with the planet as the Sorceress had been. Perhaps he'd ask Evelyn about these occurrences and see if she could shed any light on them. "Does anything stand out to you?" he asked Mekaneck.

"No," the Captain of the Guard said with a shake of his head. "Oddly, nothing at all. With so many different reports though, this one structure not giving me the heebie jeebies doesn't mean anything. I'm not getting anything unusual on my scanners, either," he confirmed, indicating his own mechanical bracer, "but I can't say anything for sure without having something else to compare it to. We'll have to investigate further."

"Agreed," Adam replied with a nod. "I'd like to know how widespread these phenomena are and for how long they've been appearing. But first, let's return to Eternos Palace. I'd like to contact the other Council members and see if they have been experiencing similar events. Also, if I can get manage to get in touch with Keldor, I'll see if Evelyn has any idea what the appearances of these buildings mean. I think the Sorceress of Grayskull would have known, and Evelyn's the closest thing we have anymore."

2.

GHOSTS

When Adam and Mekaneck arrived back at Eternos Palace, Teela was waiting for them. The queen greeted them both with a smile as they entered the palace that Adam's family had called home for generations. "Back so soon? How was it?" she asked.

"Strange, but there's not really much to report," Adam replied. "The ghost-like buildings that people have been reporting definitely do exist, but there's not really anything to go on without examining more of them and seeing if there are any differences in their readings. The one we saw today didn't register as much of anything." He glanced about the room briefly before returning his eyes to his wife. "Where's Dare?" he asked.

"Off playing with my father," she answered. "Why?"

"Did he mention his dream to you?"

"He did," she confirmed. "It sounds like he had a visit from my mother. I was happy to hear it, actually."

"He didn't tell you how it ended?" Adam asked.

"No." A strange look crossed Teela's face. "Why? Is there something I should know?" She looked to Mekaneck, but he simply shrugged in response. Adam hadn't mentioned either dream to his friend during their brief journey to Dustwind. As the three of them began making their way to the council chamber, Adam filled them in on Dare's dream and how it had ended with Hordak attacking the Sorceress of Grayskull.

"Hordak?" Teela asked. "Other than knowing that that creature is his aunt's enemy, Dare doesn't know anything about him. He certainly doesn't know what he looks like in that kind of detail. Are you sure it was Hordak he was describing, Adam?"

"I'm pretty sure," he replied. "There are plenty of monsters he could conjure up in a dream with sharp teeth and a red cape, there's no doubt of that, but the truth is that he's not the only one who dreamt of Hordak last night."

Teela's eyes widened as they entered the chamber. She grabbed Adam by his right arm and stopped him in his tracks, a feeling of great concern and worry washing over her. "You?" she asked.

"Yes," Adam said with a nod. He fell silent as a group of guards walked past them. Most royal families would have a contingent of guards with them at all times, but Adam and Teela had long ago forsaken that idea, especially in peacetime. Still, the presence of the Royal Guard remained strong within the capital city. Only when they'd passed did he speak again. "Let's continue this conversation inside. I'd like to keep this between the three of us for the time being."

Teela acquiesced with a nod, letting go of her husband's arm as they walked into the council chamber. Once the large mechanical door had slid closed behind them, the queen spoke again, her tone commanding. "You had better tell me what's going on, Adam."

"I'm going to," he said, briefly pausing to give his wife the same comforting smile he'd given the old woman in Dustwind. It didn't quite work on Teela, however, and his wife continued to look him dead in the eye, waiting for him to answer. Adam dropped the smile and indicated the chairs ahead of them. "Let's at least sit down first." Adam, Mekaneck and Teela each chose one of the three closest seats surrounding the large round table which acted as the centerpiece of the chamber. The circular design had been deliberate; an effort to show that no member of the council would sit at the "head" of the table, for there was none. Each member was equal and carried the same amount of authority. It was an idea Adam had first

heard of through some of the stories his mother Marlena had told him when he was a child; tales of a legendary king named Arthur from her home world. Supposedly, Arthur was so fine a king that the stories of his fantastic reign became myth, and would continue to be passed on for generations after his death. Ancient kings like Arthur and Adam's personal hero, his own ancestor King Grayskull, caused Adam to doubt that his reign would be as remembered, but their legends inspired him to try nonetheless.

"Adam," Teela said, noticing his distraction and reeling him back into reality.

"Yes, of course. My dream," he trailed off, recalling the horror of it. The bodies of the dead. The thought shook him even still. He tried to tell himself that it was just a dream and nothing more, but he didn't really believe that.

"Adam, the dreams you'd had of your father sent you on a journey that led you not only to him, but also to your sister Adora, who we'd all thought had been lost forever. There is a power to dreams that you know more than most. You have to understand my concern regarding this latest one," Teela said gently.

"She has a point, old friend," Mekaneck said. "Your dreams have proved fortuitous in the past. If the ones you and Dare had last night are some kind of portent of the future, especially if they involve Hordak, then you owe it to us to tell us so that we can prepare."

"I know, I know," Adam said, faltering, "but I'm not precognitive and I never have been. Even my dreams of my father weren't of the future, but rather of the past. I don't know if last night's dream means anything at all, though I'll agree that it's possible. We've all seen stranger things happen in our lives. It's hard for me to describe because it was unlike any dream I'd had before, but I'll do my best. It seemed ethereal, as only a dream can, but at the same time it was incredibly realistic, like I was actually standing there. It really did feel as if I was seeing a vision of the future." He paused, unable to hold his wife and friend's gaze as he spoke. "Or more accurately, it felt like a warning of it; an omen." He shifted uncomfortably in the ornate chair, their eyes on him as they waited for him to continue, though now with a bit more patience. They seemed acutely aware that the dream had shaken him emotionally and were now more willing to give him time to settle himself before he told them of the events it had contained. "It felt like the end of the world," he began, staring at the table in front of him as he spoke. "At first, it was just me, alone in a field. I could see the mountains in the distance. Suddenly the ground began to shake in a massive quake. The villages at the base of the mountains were destroyed in a devastating avalanche. It was like the planet itself was coming apart. The aftershocks knocked me to my knees. Suddenly I was

surrounded by the dead and found myself being pelted by a pouring rain. There were hundreds of warriors; their bodies strewn about as far as my eyes could see."

"By the Goddess," Mekaneck said.

"There's more," Adam continued. "In this dream or vision or whatever you want to call it, Castle Grayskull loomed over me once more. It was as if it had been there all along. Near it, Hordak stood upon a pile of corpses, including Adora's," he paused before continuing, "and your own. Every Master was there, dead at his feet. Hordak was victorious. It was only then that I looked down at my hands and saw that it wasn't rain falling from the sky at all. It was blood. It was at that moment that I awoke."

When he had finished speaking, Adam looked up at his wife and friend and saw their eyes wide with shock. "Adam, that," Teela stammered, unable to find the words. "Well, I'm glad you told me," she said instead, "but what does it mean?"

"It means that we should be prepared," Mekaneck said, his balled fist striking the table lightly. "Adam and Dare both dreaming of Hordak in the same night is alarming enough on its own without the strange occurrences we've been having with these ghost buildings. If you'd told me about your dream before, I wouldn't have been so eager to rush out and explore. I'd have stayed here and begun preparations for the Horde's invasion."

"Who knows if it means anything?" Adam challenged. "Besides, I needed to get out anyway and absorb it a bit," he replied. "More than that, if I'd told you before Teela, she would have killed me."

"You've got that right," Teela said. "But why would Dare dream about Hordak? That monster took your sister when she was an infant, and could have taken you too," she paused, a horrified look crossing her face. "You don't think he wants Dare?"

Adam shook his head. "Dare wasn't in my dream at all. Our son has always had a strong connection to things around him that he doesn't understand. You and I both know that. We've done what we could to protect him, but he's gifted and as he gets older, his connection to things is even more noticeable. It could just be that he somehow sensed my own anxiety and it found its way into his dream. Besides that, Hordak seemed hell-bent on destruction in my dream. The entire world was dying. He wasn't stopping by Tellus just to pick something up like he was the last time." Adam hated to make light of his sister's abduction, and he surely wasn't, but there was no doubt that the last time Hordak had been on Tellus, it'd been for the

specific mission of taking her. If Hordak had had a plan when it came to his return to Tellus within Adam's dream, it had simply been to raze it to the ground.

"I think we need to call on the Council," Mekaneck said, "to see if anyone else has received reports of apparitions like those we've seen here, as you've suggested, but also to warn them of Hordak."

"Orius, there's nothing to go on yet regarding Hordak other than dreams," Adam cautioned. "While we Eternians consider dreams to be very important, you know that not everyone on the Council feels the same. If I'm wrong, I'll look like a fool before the entire lot of them, and that's the last thing we need if we're going to keep the Council functioning smoothly. I don't want to cry dragon without proof, at least not yet."

Mekaneck nodded, though he obviously disagreed. "If you insist, Your Majesty, but don't wait too long. If we get even an inkling that Hordak is coming here, we'll need to warn them. We'll need to warn everyone."

"Of course," Adam said, "but it could still be nothing. What we know for a fact is an issue are these strange apparitions the people have been seeing. We'll deal with those first, and if we find out anything that pertains to Hordak, we'll pass that information on then, and only then." Teela and Mekaneck nodded briefly in agreement, but Adam knew that he would hear more about this from his wife later. With the issue decided, Adam pressed a button on the table and activated the holocommunicator housed within its center. The first council member he called on was his old friend and ally, Stratos of Avion. When the image of the winged Avionian wavered and came into focus, the three Eternians smiled in greeting. They had caught him mid-flight, the holosphere that flew with him capturing his graceful movements and projecting them into the room.

"I hope you don't mind my keeping this short, King Adam, but I'm in a bit of a situation here." As Stratos spoke, he quickly dodged what looked to be a large leathery-winged creature. It was hard to tell given the limited image range of the holosphere what flew with him.

"I'll try to be brief then. Stratos," Adam paused, a combined look of confusion and concern crossing his face, "are you in battle?"

"Aye!" Stratos shouted as he dodged another of the creatures. "Some kind of beast emerged from out of the caverns. They appear to be terrordactyls, but they've been extinct for thousands of—" a loud squawk drowned out their friend's last word as he barely missed being slashed by one of the creatures' large clawed feet.

"Stratos?!" Teela cried, afraid for the Avion leader's safety.

"That was close," he said as he flew back into the holosphere's range, "but I'm fine. Adam, these creatures haven't existed since Preternian times. I know every inch of those caverns and I've never seen anything to lead me to believe that they had somehow survived. Their being here makes no sense."

"I agree," Adam replied. We've been getting strange reports lately of things coming back from the past. So far, all we've seen or heard of near us has been old structures; castles and things of that nature, and even then, nothing that you could physically touch. Are you telling me that an actual living thing has returned, and an extinct species, at that?"

"That would appear to be the case, old friend," Stratos replied, his words escaping quickly as he avoided the creatures. "We'd heard reports of them, but didn't know what to believe. When myself and my best warriors investigated, we were attacked. If there are similar reports elsewhere, they need to be looked into." He dodged another of the Preternian flyers before shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Adam, but I must end this conversation. If you find the cause of this phenomena, be sure to pass it on so that we may help put an end to it."

"I will, Stratos," Adam replied. "If Avion requires aid, be sure to contact us."

"We'll be alright, I think, but if things change, I will call on the Council. Good luck."

The image shut off and the three Eternians hoped that Stratos and his people would indeed be alright. Over the next hour, they contacted other members of the Council of Kings and heard similar reports of giant reptiles, carnivorous plants, and other extinct species roaming the lands once more, ghostly apparitions appearing and disappearing without warning, and other incidents that, more and more, began to make it seem as if time itself had begun to run amok. As it stood, they had only one last member to contact. If he would indeed answer this time was something they could only wait and find out. He often ignored communications coming from Eternos Palace. To Adam's surprise, it was only a brief moment before the image of his uncle Keldor emerged from the center of the table. Keldor had aged only slightly over the past few years. Still, his responsibilities as ruler of the reborn kingdom of Zalesia were wearing on him despite the Sorceress's curse of immortality. The streaks of gray that ran through his black hair were now striking enough to compliment the thin band of a silver that made up his crown and, with the clarity of the hologram, Adam could now recognize a weariness within the man's eyes. "Keldor," Adam greeted him.

"Nephew," Keldor said with a touch of amusement before his face grew serious. "I've been awaiting your call."

"I take it you've been experiencing strange phenomena there in Zalesia as well?" Adam asked. Keldor nodded in acknowledgement. "We've heard all kinds of reports from across Tellus, things like buildings from the past suddenly returning in a ghost-like form," Adam explained. "Even extinct species are roaming the lands once more. Time itself seems to be in flux."

"Indeed," Keldor agreed. "But it's more than that. We've got our own structure here in the Sands of Time that appeared seemingly overnight, along with two others elsewhere."

"Spectral buildings, like the kind we have here?" Adam asked.

"Oh no, these are quite real," Keldor said. "In fact, you need to travel to Zalesia and see them for yourself."

Adam was dumbfounded by his uncle's words. "In all the years that you've been king, you've never once invited me to Zalesia. Why do so now?"

Keldor cracked a wry smile. "It wasn't an invitation, Adam. The Council often doubts my words. As someone who is more favored among the group, I'm summoning you here to bear witness on my behalf. The Council needs to know just how serious this situation is."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked.

Keldor's smile faded and his voice grew solemn. "The Three Towers have returned."

Adam's face went pale. "The Three Towers?" He looked to his uncle once more and saw the sincerity in the man's eyes, but there was also something else there, almost imperceptible. It was an emotion he'd never before sensed from Keldor: dread. "We'll leave immediately."

3.

SANDS OF TIME

Adam, Teela and Mekaneck left Eternia almost immediately after speaking with Keldor. Teela's father Duncan had been filled in on everything and had agreed to keep watch over the prince. Regardless of the peace that had reigned over the last several years, it was a rare occurrence that the royal family would leave the kingdom together. With Adam and Teela gone, Dare was next in line for the throne. Duncan took his responsibility very seriously for he was not just protecting his grandson, but also the boy who would one day become king. Never having been to the resurrected kingdom of Zalesia, Adam was unsure of how to present himself. He decided in the end that he would need to look strong in front of the Gar warriors, despite their being Eternia's allies. He wore not just his crown, but also donned his armor; a rather colorful combination of silver and gold with red and blue highlights. He brought with him the sword that his father Randor had brought back with him from Etheria. It was an ornate weapon, itself adorned with gold. Its silver blade was broad and sharp, its hilt formed into a cross, reminiscent of the one Adam once wore upon his chest as He-Man.

Following Adam's lead, Teela and Mekaneck also wore their battle-dress. Teela's tunic had been updated with a more armored appearance in recent years,

but it was still sleek enough to allow her sufficient movement in battle. Adam smiled inwardly knowing that her sword, safely nestled within its sheath upon her back, felt comforting to his warrior wife, who rarely carried it these days. Mekaneck's armor had also been enhanced since becoming the Captain of the Guard, but it remained largely unchanged visually, the mechanical red armor still able to expand and protect his exposed lower face when circumstances called for it. Adam noticed that his friend clutched his mace-like club nervously. Orius had never been comfortable with the tenuous alliance between Eternia and Zalesia, or more specifically between Adam and Keldor, the former having not so long ago been their most feared and hated enemy, Skeletor. Adam did his best to reassure his friends as they sped along in Adam's personal Wind Raider. "I know Keldor can be rough around the edges, but he's changed. Although I don't think we'll ever be friends, we can trust him when it comes to something as serious as the Three Towers returning."

"Speaking of which, Adam, what exactly are these towers?" Mekaneck asked. "I've never heard of them. Why did the mere mention of them get you so rattled?"

Adam hadn't realized until that moment that he he'd not even taken the time to explain his reaction regarding Keldor's words to his two companions before they had rushed off. He was thankful that in the years since his joining the two halves of the Sword of Power, he'd told his childhood friend, along with the other Masters, the truth of his former dual-identity as He-Man. It was not public knowledge by any means, but he trusted Orius and the Masters with more than just his life; he trusted them with his greatest secret. Orius having that knowledge would make Adam's explanation regarding the towers far less complicated, as it related directly to that very secret.

"I'm sorry," he began. "In my haste to leave, I never explained the towers, or at least what I know of them." He grasped the controls of the Wind Raider tightly as he recalled an old conversation. "What I know was told to me by the Sorceress of Grayskull, back when I was still He-Man. I used to seek her counsel from time to time when I was having doubts, which I must admit was pretty often. I know that I came off as brash in my youth, but I think you both understand that that was just what I projected on the surface. The truth was that, at least in the beginning, being He-Man terrified me. I didn't have any concept of responsibility at first. More than that, even when I did learn, I didn't want it. I was still very childish and had long been sheltered by the Mystic Wall, unaware of the horrors that would await us when it fell. Over the years, I embraced my new role as the most powerful man in the universe, but it was rocky at first and the Sorceress was the one that comforted me the most back then. She couldn't be a mother to Teela, and I feel that she may have satisfied at least some of her motherly instincts by providing me with the

guidance I needed. However, there was one time that her words did little to bring me comfort. They were meant to galvanize me for a coming war. She had had a vision of it and was certain that it was inevitable."

"And these towers have something to do with that vision?" Teela asked.

"Yes," he answered. "She told me that, long ago, at the end of the First Age, there was a massive war between three different armies: The Horde, led by Hordak even then, the Snake Men, led by King Hiss, and the first Eternian army, led by my ancestor King Grayskull. The war was preceded by the appearance of three magical towers, each representing a different elder god of the universe. The role the towers themselves played is unknown, but their arrival was the sign that the end was near. When all was said and done, the Snake Men were imprisoned in a frozen field of time, located deep beneath Snake Mountain, and Hordak was banished to Despondos by King Grayskull. Despite Grayskull's victory, Hordak had mortally wounded him during the battle and he didn't survive, succumbing to his injuries shortly thereafter. The war, this 'Ultimate Battleground,' as the Sorceress had described it, had ultimately ended all their rules and the First Age along with them, setting the stage for the second. After Grayskull's death, the towers vanished, returning to a hidden space between dimensions."

"But what does that have to do with you?" Mekaneck asked.

"That's what worries me," Adam answered. "The Sorceress told me that she'd had a vision of the towers returning and that their arrival would signal the end of our current age, just as they had the last. She told me that I, as He-Man, would play a role in the ultimate battle, along with her and the power of Castle Grayskull."

"But my mother is dead," Teela said, an echo of that familiar hurt in her voice as she spoke. "And you're not He-Man anymore."

"Not to mention the fact that Castle Grayskull is gone," Mekaneck added.

"I know, and that's precisely the reason I've not spent much time thinking about her vision since the castle fell, but maybe it was only partly right?" Adam reasoned. "Perhaps things have changed? She told me that the future was always in motion, that time is relentless. Maybe the war is still coming, this second Ultimate Battleground, and it will be fought regardless of whether or not we have the power of Castle—," he trailed off as the Wind Raider crested a hill, bringing the horizon into view, "Grayskull," he finished. Far to the group's left, the solitary peak where Grayskull once stood strong and proud was within sight. Near it was one of the very towers Adam had spoken of glistening in the sun, as if it had appeared overnight. Piercing the sky, the tower resembled the brickwork of the familiar castle.

It was called Zoar Tower, and had been King Grayskull's base of operations during the Ultimate Battleground. Even more startling was the fact that there was, near the legendary Zoar Tower, a ghostly apparition of Castle Grayskull itself. The sight of both structures caused Adam's face to drain of color. Teela and Mekaneck followed his line of sight, but were focused on the tower, rather than the returned castle.

"Adam, are you alright?" Teela asked.

"It's Zoar Tower," he said. "One of the Three Towers that I spoke of. Keldor said that the towers were back, but I never expected to see Castle Grayskull itself again."

"Castle Grayskull?" Mekaneck responded.

"Of course," Adam said. "Can't you see it?"

"I see the tower just fine," Mekaneck responded, "but that's all."

Adam turned the controls toward the spectral Grayskull and upped the Wind Raider's speed. "Adam?" Teela asked again.

"I can see it," Adam answered. "I can see Grayskull. It looks like the ghostly castle that Mekaneck and I investigated earlier," he paused, "but it's Grayskull!" He looked to his wife and friend, but knew immediately upon seeing their confusion that they didn't share his vision. He scanned their faces for any sign of doubt, but they appeared sincere. "You really can't see it, can you?"

"I'm sorry, Adam," Teela answered, "but if you say that you can see it, I believe you."

"Me too," Mekaneck spoke up. "It's strange that we can't see it, seeing as how that tower and all of the other ghost structures have been visible, but Grayskull has always been a strange place, so what can I say? I definitely agree that we should check it out."

Adam felt the wind whipping his long hair about as they sped along to the place where the ghostly image of Grayskull stood. What did it mean? When he thought about it, it didn't surprise him to see Grayskull considering the other apparitions that had recently appeared. In fact, he should have expected it. Grayskull had always been a uniquely magical structure. What was really throwing him off was the fact that his companions could see Zoar Tower, but not the castle. Why was that? It didn't take long to reach the spectral structure and Adam, Teela and Mekaneck climbed out of the Wind Raider cautiously.

"Can you still see it?" Mekaneck asked.

"Oh yes," Adam answered. "It looks just like I remember it, but it seems," he paused, searching for an accurate descriptor, "younger, somehow. I don't know how else to put it. It looks younger, healthier, more vibrant. It was practically held together by magical threads as we knew it, but here it looks like it's just been built."

"What do you think it means?" Teela asked. "Why can only you see it? Orius never had a direct connection to the castle, but I was Sorceress for a brief time, and I can't see it either."

"Jealous?" Adam asked.

"Don't be silly," she replied. "I just want to understand what's happening here."

After a moment of thought, Adam shrugged and looked back to his wife. "I think the best way to do that is to continue to Zalesia and see what Keldor and Evelyn have to say about the towers," he said, sounding resigned after his initial excitement. "If this castle is anything like the other one that Orius and I saw, it's just a ghost of the past and nothing more. There's nothing left that Castle Grayskull can teach me." As Adam and his companions walked back to the Wind Raider, a shadowy figure within the castle approached the turret tower's window and watched them in silence as they left.

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Despite the wind that whipped by them as they travelled, Adam felt a bead of sweat grow on his brow as their vehicle approached the once-lost city of Zalesia. The desert was hot, but the heat of the sun wasn't the sole cause of his perspiration. Adam had been to Zalesia before, but only when it had still been in ruins. In the years since Keldor had raised it from the sands and restored the great city, Adam had never once returned. Now a kingdom once more, Zalesia had become the permanent home of the Gar, a war-like race that had become nomadic after centuries of forced exile. Half Gar himself, Keldor had finally given the feared race a permanent home, naming himself their king in the process, of course. No Gar argued the appointment or title and the fact that they had accepted Keldor as king only proved their gratitude, as the blue-skinned race typically disavowed those who weren't "pure of blood." There were many diverse cultures across Tellus, most of which got along in peace, Adam reasoned silently. Perhaps the Gar had an

undeserved reputation. Nevertheless, he still felt nervous as he parked the Wind Raider and approached the city's massive gate, with Teela and Mekaneck following closely behind.

Two of the blue-skinned guards stood watch over the gate, opening it as Adam and his friends approached. The guards wore purple and gold armor that, while mechanical in nature, still managed to appear ripped from the past, reminiscent of those worn by the Gar war-mages of the First Age. Prior to the scattering of their race across the planet, the Gar were known for their magic and that, combined with their advanced knowledge of mechanics and science, gave the humans of Preternian times plenty of reason to fear them. The Gar were then newly arrived to Tellus, having travelled from a long-forgotten planet located somewhere in what was now considered the unexplored regions of space. Regardless of their prowess with magic and science, perhaps the Gar's alien nature would have caused the more primitive natives of Tellus to fear them anyway, Adam reasoned. People always tended to fear what they didn't understand. Now, nearly a thousand years later, Adam found himself feeling that same fear; that of someone who found themselves in a strange land, surrounded by strange people. Then again, perhaps that was how the Gar themselves felt even now, having been repeatedly ousted from their chosen homes over the centuries, the constant rejections paving the way for their nomadic nature by necessity rather than by choice. Ostracized from every other culture they shared the planet with, the Gar were ever the untrusted outsiders. Keldor giving them a home and a leader had united them in a way that they had never been on this planet, leading the Gar to become one of the most powerful races on Tellus; a sudden shift that unsettled the rest of the world's inhabitants more than they were willing to admit. Change in power structures were always difficult, and were often met with hostility. An uprising against the Gar was always a possibility, especially from the smaller races, who felt more threatened, but so far peace had been successfully maintained. "You are expected," the guard on the left said as he and the other guard stepped aside, bowing slightly out of courtesy, but nothing more, allowing Adam and his group to pass by. The Gar only truly bowed to their own king and queen.

Adam knew that if he was feeling tense, then Teela and Mekaneck must be too, perhaps even more so. Still, he put on the bravest face possible as they made their way to the Temple of Zalesia. The temple had been impressive enough on its own, before the restoration of the city, the lone building standing in stark contrast to the surrounding desert, but it now stood out even more as a uniquely powerful structure. None of the other Zalesian architecture could match its grandeur. Another set of heavily armored guards parted for Adam and his companions as they made their way up the sand-swept marble steps. The last time Adam had been

here, the columns inside the palace had been cracked and strung together with a thick tapestry of spider webs. Now restored to their original glory, the white marble columns gleamed before him, their intricate designs no longer filled with dust, but accented with gold and beautiful to the eye.

A female Gar approached them from a hallway to their left. She wore the long, ornate robes of a scientist, her face largely hidden within a ceremonial hood. To the Gar, science was practically a religion in and of itself, and there was little difference between a scientist and a master of magic. Their god Havok, long ago adopted from the ancient Zalesians who had called this city home before its destruction, symbolized the chaos of life itself; the things that their science could not explain, and most importantly, the essence of change and adaptation. Havok was a god that suited them, considering that they'd had to adapt to new surroundings regularly for centuries. Despite the Gar's respect for science, they were not as reasonable and reserved as they would appear to one unaware of their customs. They had a strict code of honor, but an equally voracious taste for war to give it meaning and Adam found that duality troublesome. The Eternian king looked ahead as their guide pointed toward a wide and elaborately decorated staircase at the temple's center. "This way," she said simply, indicating with a gesture that Adam and his group should ascend them. The woman remained at the bottom of the stairs, watching them in silence as they made their way to the top alone. When they reached the apex of the stairway, the mechanical door that it led to swung open almost silently. Entering, they found Keldor sitting upon his throne, otherwise alone in the large room. He was casually attired, or at least as casually as Adam had seen him. He wore a purple silk shirt, black leather trousers and black boots. The silver bracers that adorned his forearms gleamed in the light let in by the large windows of the temple's throne room. The man who had once been Skeletor remained seated as they approached.

Adam nodded in greeting while he, Teela and Orius stopped a respectful distance from the Gar ruler. "Uncle," he said simply.

"Nephew," Keldor replied in turn, giving the group a curious look. "I see that you and your friends have come dressed for war."

"The Gar admire strength," Adam said. "I wanted to make sure that they knew I was aware of their customs."

Keldor chuckled, and Adam suspected that the man was aware of his guests' unease. "If you say so."

"What you've done here is," Adam paused, once again taking in the sight of the rejuvenated temple they stood in, "incredibly impressive," he finished.

Keldor sighed and waved his hand dismissively. "Let's dispense with the pleasantries, shall we? I have no stomach for such nonsense and I highly doubt that you're enjoying it."

"Of course," Adam replied amicably. "Shall we get to it then?"

Keldor rose from his seated position and smiled grimly. "Yes. Follow me." The half-Gar sorcerer made his way to a back door hidden behind his throne and beckoned them to follow.

As they entered the hidden passageway the door led to, Adam couldn't help but speak up. "We saw the Tower of Zoar on our way here. I assume that the Central Tower is here in Zalesia, as it was in the past?"

Keldor nodded. "Indeed. It's nearby, and from here, Viper Tower can also be seen to the East, near Snake Mountain."

The tunnel Keldor lead them through was small and cramped, but Adam could already see the end of it, not far ahead of them. "I have to admit some fear at the prospect of what their return means," Adam said. "I know you feel it, too."

"I fear nothing," Keldor said, rather unconvincingly to Adam's ears.

"We didn't see the Central Tower on the way here," Teela said.

"It is beyond Zalesia, but reasonably close," Keldor replied. "When you see it, you'll understand why it wasn't visible from your direction." When they approached the door at the end of the hidden tunnel, Keldor opened it, leading them outside not just the temple, but the walls of the kingdom itself. "This passageway was once an escape route for Zalesian leaders during the First Age. I use it when I wish to leave the temple quietly. Never having had a king before, the Gar can be a bit overprotective for my taste."

"Well, look at you," Adam heard a familiar female voice say from his right as they emerged from the secret exit. He turned to see Evelyn walking toward them. She wore an elaborate black and purple gown with a plunging neckline, her familiar staff held tight in her right hand. Eyeing Adam's armor, the woman smiled. "I see that you've finally adopted the proper look of a king." She approached Teela and nodded in greeting. "And you look lovely, of course. How is Dare?"

"He's well," Teela said shortly. Although Evelyn had remained their primary Zalesian contact, Teela had never gotten completely comfortable around the woman, especially when it came to discussing their son. She could never forget the fact that Evelyn and Keldor had been complicit in the abduction of Adam's sister

Adora when she was but a babe. Adam knew that his wife would never fully trust the woman. In the back of his own mind, he often thought that perhaps she was right not to. Evelyn had helped them in the past, most notably in helping Adam find his father after the man had been lost to Despondos, but the sins of the past could never truly be erased. The look of sadness that remained buried deep within Evelyn's eyes, but visible to those who knew her well, proved that she knew that truth also.

"That is good to hear," Evelyn replied. "I feel his presence at times, even from here. I'm sure he will be very powerful." Nodding briefly to Mekaneck as she passed him, she returned to the subject at hand. "Follow us," she said, leading the way as they walked to the base of a large sand dune. "The Central Tower is on the other side."

After a rather difficult climb, the spire of the Central Tower became visible as they reached the dune's highest point. Stepping over the apex, the entire mystical tower came into view, hidden in a valley within the Sands of Time. Adam knew that Zoar Tower, near Grayskull, represented the Eternian falcon-goddess. Viper Tower, located near Snake Mountain, represented the snake god, Serpos. Good and evil, respectively. Following that pattern, Adam would have expected this third tower to represent the third most well-known god of Tellus, the ram-headed Havok. It was instead adored with a giant cat's head, sculpted into an open roar above the tower's entrance. Not an expert in Zalesian history by any means, Adam wondered silently whether the cat that graced the tower somehow represented Havok as well, despite the absence of any symbols that were familiar to him. Would it truly be that odd for the god of change to adopt different symbols, different interpretations, over time? Adam reasoned that that possibility was likely.

Pointing to the East, Keldor showed that Viper Tower was also visible in the far distance. "As you can see, the Three Towers have returned," Keldor said, his voice turning ominous. "And so we enter the end of our age, and perhaps the end of everything."

4.

THE CALL

The five of them stood in silence for several minutes as they took in the sight of the fabled towers before them. “In a way, it makes sense that at least one of them would reappear here,” Evelyn stated matter-of-factly. “The Sands of Time have always been a mystical and mysterious location. Growing up, my father would tell me stories of caravans from his time that would pass through this place, never to be seen again. Hunting parties would disappear, only to return to the city months later, not feeling as if any time had passed. As a youth, I was forbidden to come here, away from his watchful eyes, or what passed for them.” Evelyn’s father, they knew, was the spirit known as The Faceless One. “I’d explore them anyway, of course,” she added.

“Who first saw the towers?” Teela asked.

“I did,” Evelyn said. “These days, a good bit wiser than I was in my youth, I know better than to wander out here alone. However, I had a vision last night; a great battle where the skies rained blood.”

Adam couldn’t hide his shock. “I had a similar vision, but in a dream. Did you see Hordak in yours?”

"Hordak?" Evelyn asked. "Not specifically, no. Though I did see The Horde army. Where were you?"

"In my dream, Castle Grayskull had returned. Not as an apparition, but real. That's where I found myself," Adam replied.

"How very strange," she said. "In my vision, I was here in Zalesia, with Keldor and the Gar army. The battle stretched on as far as I could see," she said. "It would appear that your dream and my vision are related, Adam, but that yours took place in a different location of the battle."

"And you saw these towers in your dream?" Adam asked.

"Yes," she answered. "In my dream, however, the towers were somehow united. I felt as if we were protecting them somehow. I know the old legends well, Adam and I knew as I stood amongst the Gar warriors fighting against The Horde that my vision was of the war to end all wars; a fight for our very planet, if not more." She looked to the Central Tower, lost in thought for a moment before turning back to the rest of the group. "When the vision ended, I was covered in sweat, as if I'd actually been in the battle just moments before. I made my way to the highest point of the temple and looked toward the Sands of Time, where I had seen the Central Tower in my vision, and there it stood, in stark reality. Looking in the directions of both Snake Mountain and the peak where Castle Grayskull once stood, I could also see the other two towers. Seeing them came with a bizarre feeling of familiarity, as if they'd always been there."

"But they weren't," Mekaneck said. "This is crazy. How can something like this just appear overnight?" he asked, pointing to the large tower in front of them.

"Zalesia was also lost to the sands, before I used my magic to raise it once more," Keldor said. "Things that have been lost have a way of being found again, when the time is right."

"Do you think it's possible that someone could have done this with magic?" Adam asked. "That someone would want this war to happen?"

Keldor shook his head. "Can't you feel it?" he asked. "No mere mortal had the power to do this."

"Then what does?" Mekaneck asked.

"The gods, boy," Keldor answered, glancing toward the Eternian Captain of the Guard. "Only the gods themselves could have brought the towers back."

Mekaneck took a step toward the Central Tower. "Well?" he asked. "Aren't we going to check it out?"

"Not without an army at our backs," Keldor said.

Adam nodded. "For once I agree with my uncle with no argument. We simply don't know enough about these towers to risk it."

"Besides," Teela chimed in, "if the stories Evelyn heard as a child are true, we might get lost somewhere in time ourselves."

"Alright," Mekaneck said with a sigh. "I'm sure you're right." Adam noticed the disappointment on his friend's face nonetheless.

"Has there been any change to the towers since they arrived?" Adam asked. "Some of the other phenomenon have faded away, only to return later."

"No," Evelyn said. "Unfortunately, I don't think that the towers are going anywhere. Not until whatever is coming is over." As she spoke, the sun dipped past the crest of the dunes that surrounded the valley and dusk settled upon the group. Evelyn looked to Adam and his companions. "It's getting late. You all are welcome to spend the night here, if you wish. The desert is a dangerous place at night, even without the threat of ghosts from the past."

Adam looked to Keldor, who seemed annoyed at Evelyn's invitation, but she was right. It wasn't worth the risk of travelling the desert at night, especially with the strange occurrences that have been plaguing the planet since the towers returned. Zalesia had so far been spared of any extinct species or anomalies of that nature, but there was no telling if or when that would change. Adam felt safer in the knowledge that his group would be able to spend the night here with a roof over their heads. "Thank you, Evelyn. You're sure it's no trouble?"

"No trouble at all," the woman answered. Keldor scoffed lightly in response. "Oh, shut up," she said playfully. "It's only for the night."

"You won't even know we're here," Adam said.

"Fine," Keldor replied. "So, you will tell the Council of the towers?" Adam took notice of the fact that Keldor was asking him far away from his subjects. The last thing Keldor wanted was to appear weak. His uncle didn't fear the Gar, but he did demand their respect. His asking for help in this regard was more than just out-of-character for the sorcerer, it showed just how serious the situation was.

"Yes, of course," Adam replied. "Although I feel the need to tell you that your word carries more weight at the Council than you give yourself credit for."

"Nonetheless, they respect you," Keldor said, "and having you here to see the towers in person will accomplish more than I would be able to on my word alone."

Adam smiled. In the years since the Council of Kings had brought them together in a tenuous alliance, it was the closest thing to a compliment that he'd gotten from the man.

* * *

Adam awoke the next morning feeling groggy. He'd always had a tough time sleeping away from home. He'd had no dreams during the night that he could remember and from what he could gather, neither had Keldor, Evelyn, or the others. No one had mentioned any new visions, at any rate. Not long after sunrise, Adam, Teela and Mekaneck left Zalesia. Knowing that they would be gathering the Council the following day, Keldor and Evelyn had agreed to join them at that time. Until then, Adam's uncle had preparations to make. Adam hadn't asked what they were, but when Keldor made preparations, it usually meant magic.

Adam and his companions climbed into his Wind Raider in silence. Evelyn had seen the Horde army in a vision; a vision that she'd had on the same night as Adam and Dare's own premonition-like dreams about The Horde. It would appear that, with the reemergence of the Three Towers, war was indeed on the horizon. It was now abundantly clear that that war would involve Hordak and his army, just as another epic war had once before, over a thousand years before. Only then, the world had had King Grayskull, who had emerged victorious over Hordak, cementing Eternia's legacy in the history of Tellus. Legendary even in his own time, Grayskull was a warrior king whose feats of strength would fuel myths and songs for a millennium. It was that very power that Adam had channeled into for years, allowing him to become He-Man. The thought of his ancestor painfully reminded Adam that he no longer had access to that strength. He was now a mere man; a man who had once had the power, but no longer.

The Eternian king wished that his fellow Council members could arrive faster, but it would take a full day for them all to arrive at Eternos Palace with such short notice. Most Council meetings were conducted with holospheres, but the yearly meeting that they conducted in person was overdue as it was and Adam knew that these events were more than worthy. Mekaneck had been right: the world's leaders needed to be warned, not only of the Three Towers and what their return meant,

but of the threat that Hordak posed as well. A possible invasion by The Horde had been one of the primary reasons that the Council had been formed in the first place; an effort to unite Tellus against a common foe. Despite Adam's earlier doubts, it now seemed clear that that foe was coming for them. Adam hope now was not only that the Council would believe him, but that they wouldn't already be too late.

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Adam held the controls tightly as they passed Zoar Tower and came near the apparition of Castle Grayskull once more. Adam, he heard a voice say in his mind. The voice wasn't his own. *Adam, return to the castle. We need to speak.* A chill ran through his body brought on by old memories long gone. The voice sounded like the Sorceress! Adam once again turned sharply in the direction of the spectral Castle.

"Adam, what are you doing?" Teela asked. "We need to get back to Eternos Palace and warn the Council. More than that, I need to find somewhere to hide Dare, to keep him safe."

"I know, Teela," Adam shouted over the louder-than-normal hum of the taxed engines. "I can't explain it, but we have to stop by the site of Castle Grayskull first. It's calling to me, and you know I can't ignore that."

"Of course not," Teela said, though her voice remained full of worry. His queen likely felt that Grayskull had impacted their lives enough. Would it continue to do so, even after crumbling to dust years ago?

Adam leapt from the Wind Raider as soon as it had stopped and made his way to the ghostly form of what had once been Castle Grayskull. The king looked on as the jawbridge lowered across the open chasm that separated them from the solitary peak that the castle had once called home. The ghostly castle in Dustwind that Adam and Mekaneck had investigated hadn't moved at all. It had seemed completely frozen in time. The fact that Castle Grayskull's jawbridge had opened proved to him that there was something distinctly different about this particular phenomenon, if it wasn't already obvious due to the fact that only he could see it. He stepped away from the chasm and rejoined Teela and Mekaneck. "The bridge just lowered, but I don't feel as if I can cross," he said. "If it's anything like the castle Orius and I saw, I'd pass right through the bridge and fall to my death."

The three of them stood silently for a moment before a loud series of musical notes pierced the air. The wind whipped up around them, blowing Adam's hair about his face. Turning to the sound's origin, he shielded his eyes from a bright light that appeared in the open air one hundred yards back from where they'd come. It was a portal. "The Cosmic Key!" Adam shouted. "Hordak must have gotten it back and found a way here! Draw your weapons!" The three of them did as he had said and Adam felt his hands perspire slightly in anticipation of a battle that he was not yet ready for. Not even close.

In the distance, the portal opened fully and a lone figure shot out of it, tumbling to the grassy fields of the healed planet. A Horde scout, perhaps? Expecting to see the bulky mechanical armor of a Horde Trooper, the Eternian King and his companions were shocked to see just who it was that stood up in the tall grasses as the portal closed behind her. It was a woman, Adam noted. She was tall, with blond hair that was long and flowing. Held tight in her right hand was the Sword of Protection. "Adora," he said softly, recognition setting in. She had changed considerably. She wore a white dress adorned with golden armor and a flowing red cape. Upon her head was a winged headdress, the gold that it was forged from glinting in the sunlight. Standing much taller than he remembered, she was leanly muscled and resembled the warrior women of ages past that Adam used to hear stories about. He realized then that, as he had once used the Sword of Light to harness the power of Grayskull, she must have used the Sword of Protection in a similar way, becoming a mighty warrior that was similar, yet stunningly different from He-Man. Her new look suited her, however. Rather than the black and gray armor of Despara, along with the mask that mirrored Hordak's vile visage, she now resembled a goddess of the old tales. Her beauty was stunning. *Amazing*, he thought.

Adora sheathed the sword on her back as she approached. As she approached, Adam was startled to see that she had aged much in the years she'd been gone, not physically, but in the expression of weariness she wore on her face, despite her attempts to hide it upon seeing Adam and his companions. It was a weariness that Adam knew well. It came from years of war, along with the pain of the lost friends that went with it. Adam flushed with shame, wishing not for the first time that he could have helped her more in her war against The Horde, but he had had enough trouble keeping the Council functioning here on Tellus, not to mention his duties as a father. Besides, without the Power of Grayskull, what could he have done?

"Adam," she said brightly, rushing toward them. "My friends, how is it that you're here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," he replied. "I had no idea you were coming."

"I'm so happy to see you, Brother!" she exclaimed, smiling warmly as she embraced him. "And Teela and Orius, too, of course." Letting go, she took a step back.

"You look so different," Teela said.

Adora nodded. "Using the power of the Sword of Protection, I'm able to transform, as Adam once did," she said, confirming his conclusions. "The power of the Sorceress has been a real blessing as things have only gotten worse on Etheria. In this form, I'm known as She-Ra." Taking in the sight of her, Adam noticed with some amusement that he had to look up to meet her eyes while she was in this form. With the words, "let the power return," his sister reverted to her normal form of Adora. "But I'm still more comfortable as myself," she said. Adam smiled, for he knew that that had not always been the case, but his sister's days as Despara, Force Captain of the Horde army, were far behind her now.

"It's wonderful to see you, Adora," Adam said, "but I can't help but think that this isn't just a social call, especially considering where we're all standing. What brings you here?"

"Although it thrills me to see you all again, I'm afraid that you're right," Adora answered. "I'm here on a mission."

"What kind of mission?" he asked.

"A mission to travel here," Adora said, "to Castle Grayskull." She indicated the ghostly castle behind him.

"You can see it too?" he asked.

"Well yes," she replied. "Why? Can't they?" She looked to Teela and Mekaneck, who shook their heads. "I guess not," Adora said, answering her own question. "What do you think it means, Adam? Why can you and I see it, but not them?"

Before Adam could speak, a bird's cry pierced the brief silence before a voice once again spoke in his mind. *Only the heirs of Grayskull can see the castle in this state.* Glancing toward his friends, Adam recognized that they had all heard the voice this time. In a single movement, the group all looked up to see a bird of prey soaring through the air toward them from the direction of the castle, backlit by the

sun. As the bird dove to meet them, Adam caught a glimpse of its wing. It was the color of budding leaves.

"That's a green falcon," Adam whispered, echoing all their thoughts. "Then the Sorceress has returned."

The falcon landed on the ground at their feet. As it folded its wings forward over its head, the bird enveloped itself within a cocoon of blinding light. Adam and his companions shielded their eyes from it instinctively. When they reopened them, Adam was shocked to see a stranger standing before them. The woman in front of them certainly reminded Adam of the Sorceress of Grayskull that he knew, but this was definitely not Teela's mother Teela 'Na. The unknown woman stood about as tall as Adora and wore the elaborately decorated gold and silver armor of a bygone age over a white tunic. Upon her head was a sculpted helm that represented Zoar, much like Teela 'Na's feathered headdress had, but this woman's adornment was instead comprised of gold-plated armor. Where, in many ways, Teela 'Na had symbolized peace, this woman was obviously a warrior. Large angelic wings spread wide from her lower back and in her right hand she clutched a golden staff.

"Who are you?" Teela asked.

"I am the Sorceress of Grayskull," the woman answered.

"You're not the Sorceress that I knew," Teela countered, visibly shocked and disappointed that it was not her mother she saw before her.

"No," the woman said. "I am the first Sorceress, from a time long before your mother accepted my burden. I am called 'Veena' by your kind."

"Veena?" Adam asked. "As in 'Veena, the wife of King Grayskull'?"

"One and the same," she answered. "All will be explained within the castle."

"Regardless of how impossible it is that you're who you say you are, we can't enter the castle," Adam reasoned. "We'll fall through."

"Only because it is caught between dimensions of space and time," Veena answered, as if it were the simplest thing she'd ever had to explain. "That is easily fixed," she continued. Raising her staff, she pointed it at the spectral castle. The spectral structure vibrated and shook and, before Adam and Adora's eyes, it slowly regained its color, brick by brick, as Veena pulled it into phase with their current time. Within a minute, it was there, as if it had never left. Looking to his wife and Orius, Adam knew that they could now see it too. "Now," Veena said, "I would ask Adam and Adora to enter."

"What about us?" Teela challenged.

"You will return home to Eternia," Veena replied. Seeing the expression of disappointment on the queen's face, she added, "Do not mistake my words as disrespect. What is to happen inside is for the heirs of Grayskull alone. Only they may enter at this time."

"And you?" Teela asked.

"This castle was once my home," Veena said. "I am always welcome." The original Sorceress turned toward the castle. "You must excuse us," she said matter-of-factly as she walked away. "It is imperative that I speak to the heirs now."

Teela gazed upon at the strange woman curiously, but knew that she was powerless in this situation. Former sorceress herself or not, this particular part of the journey was beyond her. If Veena had somehow returned from the dead to speak with her husband, then such a thing was obviously of immense importance. It was just horrible timing, was all. "Adam," she called out as her husband and his sister began walking toward the reborn Castle Grayskull. "Orius and I will continue on and call upon the Council. Try to join us soon. Time is of the essence."

"Your wife is wise, Adam," Veena assured him. The Sorceress turned back and gave the queen a soft smile. "Fear not, Teela. I will return Adam and Adora to you when the time is right."

Teela nodded once more as she watched Adam and Adora enter the castle, the jawbridge closing behind them. This was more than just important, she realized. This was perhaps exactly what they needed prior to Hordak's arrival. With Grayskull behind them once more, they had a fighting chance. Rather than the worry, she now felt something else: hope.

5.

THE PROPHECY

“Is Grayskull appearing related to the other ghost structures that we’ve seen?” Adam asked as the jawbridge closed.

“No. It has returned because I willed it,” Veena answered as they walked into the throne room. “If I’m to be here, then I want to be in my old home.” The first Sorceress of Grayskull sat upon the throne, her wings draping over the sides of the ornate chair. “The universe is in flux, Adam. Time is folding in on itself and things thought long gone have returned, all because of the Three Towers.”

“So that’s why the ghost-like buildings and other phenomenon have appeared?” Adam asked.

“Yes,” Veena responded, her face impassive despite the significance of her words, “but their time here is fleeting. Now that the Three Towers have returned, the world will soon return to its usual balance.”

Adam turned to Adora, who had remained in quiet awe of her surroundings. “Grayskull was already gone before you returned from Etheria with us, Sister.

You've never had a connection to the castle, other than by blood. How'd you know to come here?"

"Veena came to me in a dream last night," Adora said, indicating the unfamiliar Sorceress before them. "She called me here. The timing is unfortunate. We'd just found out that Hordak forced Gwildor the locksmith to build two more Cosmic Keys. They took time for Gwildor to complete, and he stalled as much as possible, but he finished them before we could rescue him. Hordak took one, the other was given to his second in command."

"Is Hordak coming here, then?" Adam asked. "Is that why you've called us here?" he asked veena, turning toward her. The woman eyed both of them curiously, but she seemed particularly fascinated with him. "What?" Adam asked, wondering why she couldn't take her eyes off him.

"You look much like my husband, Adam," she said. "Even after dozens of generations, you are so similar in appearance that it pains me to see you. To you, D'Vann Grayskull is merely a part of your lineage, a legend of the past, but to me he was so much more."

"I'm sorry," he said simply, not sure of how to respond.

"Don't be," she replied. "It is difficult in some ways to see him in you, but comforting as well. It's been so very long."

"You were his wife," Adam said. "But your being here now proves that there is more to you. You are no ghost from the past and you're not back from the dead, either."

"You are correct, Adam," she replied. "I am not. As I said before, I am the first Sorceress of Castle Grayskull. Your kind know me as Veena, D'Vann Grayskull's queen, but this is merely one of the forms that I have taken over the ages. It is the first human form I ever took, after I met D'Vann; after I chose him to be my champion. I desired to be closer to him," she hesitated briefly, appearing almost embarrassed, though only for a fleeting moment, "to better understand humanity."

"And what is your true form?" Adora asked.

Veena smiled thinly. "I have many names, though Eternians have called me Zoar."

"The goddess?" Adam asked, his eyes growing wide.

"A rather limiting word," she responded.

"Well, what are you then?" Adora asked.

"The goddess," Veena replied with a whimsical smile. "In truth, I am many things," she continued, "and all things. But those explanations are not important now, for what I am today is a messenger. More than a thousand years ago, when King Grayskull was killed, Hordak thought that he had won, despite his defeat in the battle, by striking a fatal blow to my husband. Even then, Hordak knew of the prophecy of the Twins of Grayskull; the Twins of Power." She eyed both Adam and Adora, putting special emphasis on her next words. "Of you. He thought that with Grayskull dead, the prophecy had been prevented. He didn't know that I was with child."

"The prophecy reads that 'one would shine in the light while the other would fall to the darkness,'" Adora quoted. "But what does that have to do with Hordak, other than the obvious: his kidnapping me? What was there to prevent?"

"Yes, please explain that," Adam said. "The Sorceress, the one from our time, told me of this prophecy, but neither Adora nor I have ever fully understood it."

Veena smiled faintly. "That is because the two of you only know the first half of it. It is the second half of the prophecy that Hordak takes a special interest in: 'but one day, the power of Grayskull would unite them, making itself whole once more, for only together would the power of their combined light destroy the darkness forever.' Hordak's twisting Adora into Despara was simply another attempt to forestall his own end."

"So that's the real reason that he didn't take the both of us?" Adora asked. "That's why he separated us as infants? We were a threat to him as long as we were together?"

"Yes," Veena replied, "for at his core, Hordak is a coward who cares for nothing but his own survival. Now, despite stealing you away many years ago, you and Adam have been reunited, as the prophecy foretold."

"But if you're from the past, how can you know all of this?" Adora asked. "How could you know about my history with The Horde?"

"Because she's Zoar," Adam answered for her. "She's one of the architects of the universe. Why wouldn't she know?"

Adora looked to Veena, who merely nodded. "Nonsense," Adora said. "If you really are the goddess, why don't you just prevent all of this?"

"Why would I do that?" Veena asked.

"Because you have the power to," Adora challenged. "Why wouldn't you prevent the evils that Hordak will commit? Why didn't you stop the ones he's committed in the past?"

"Evil is necessary for balance," Veena answered. "My siblings and I seldom involve ourselves in the affairs of our creations, but Hordak has finally gone too far. He seeks to travel to the Nexus of Time in an effort to conduct a spell that he thinks will rewrite the universe in his image. He wishes to become the one and only god. His hubris is an affront to us."

"But how?" Adora asked. "I thought he needed the blood of Grayskull in addition to the Cosmic Key? I know he now has a Key again, but I thought we'd stopped him by my defecting?"

"Before you left The Horde," Veena said, "Shadow Weaver regularly took samples of your blood for testing. I'm sure you remember. Regardless of your leaving, he has all the blood from you that he needs. Your battle with Hordak has raged for years and in that time, he has been unsuccessful in taking back your Cosmic Key. Now, the Three Towers have returned and the window for his spell to be successful draws ever nearer. That is why he forced the locksmith Gwildor to make another. Hordak is running out of time."

"Then if this is happening so soon," Adora began, "if his ultimate victory is already in motion, why are we not even attempting to stop him? Why are we standing here talking?" she demanded.

"To complete his spell, Hordak must reach and control the Nexus of Time, located at the base of the Three Towers once they have converged. However, their convergence will take time and he must wait until it is finished. Only once the towers have united will he be able to achieve his goal. In the meantime, it is imperative that you both understand what is at stake before you confront him."

"We already know what's at stake," Adora argued. "If Hordak uses the Nexus of Time to go back to the beginning of it, he will remake all things in his image and become master of the universe."

Veena laughed so loudly that Adora and her brother were visibly startled. "A plan that only proves his insanity," she said.

"You mean it's not possible?" Adam asked.

"My siblings and I are the universe. Without life, change and time; without us; there is nothing. Hordak cannot end us, nor can he master us. None could, unless we ourselves allowed it." She shook her head, her smile fading as she did so. "Though our end is inevitable, all things die in time, that end will come only when we have agreed upon it. It won't come at the whim of any of the creatures we've created, and certainly not because of Hordak. At best, his spell would eradicate all life but my siblings and I, the universe, will be unaffected. The real threat is to you and all the living creatures that populate our worlds. If Hordak's spell is successful, you will be destroyed. Fortunately for you, I have long held an interest in human affairs."

"Enough of an interest that you fell in love with one," Adam said.

"Indeed," Veena acknowledged. "You are one of very few bloodlines to have a god for an ancestor. D'Vann Grayskull's blood flows through your veins, my children, but your true power comes from me, just as his once did."

"Then if the power is not solely from Grayskull, why was mine taken from me when Castle Grayskull was destroyed?" Adam asked. "When I reunited the two halves of his sword?"

Veena nodded, understanding his confusion. "You are the descendant of King Grayskull and myself, Adam, but many generations separate us. Your power alone is weak and watered down compared to the source. By using D'Vann's sword, you could channel into the power directly, for it was a direct conduit to your ancestor. You gifted that power to the planet, healing it, as you remember, after your final battle with Skeletor. Now D'Vann's blade has become the Sword of Protection and what power remains in it now belongs to your sister."

"I understand," Adam said.

"I'm not sure that you do," she replied. "The sword does still hold power, Adam. That much is proven by Adora's own transformation into She-Ra, but the power of Grayskull is not lost to you without it."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Veena rose from her throne and approached him. "You can gain back the power by receiving it just as Grayskull first did and indeed you'll need it to defeat Hordak and his legions."

"Receiving it just as Grayskull first did?" he quoted back to her. "I don't understand. The legends say that he was born with the power."

"Yes," Veena nodded, a slight smile crossing her lips, "but the legends say many things, many of which are fallacies. I alone know the truth."

"How, then?" Adam asked. "How did he receive it?"

"If I told you outright, it would not serve to better you," Veena said. "Indeed, I could just give the power to you now, but what would you learn? Besides, I need you to help me achieve another purpose, so I will send you and your sister to the proper time in order to find the power for yourselves. Along the way, you will help make things as they should be, just as you always have."

"What do you mean?" Adora asked.

"I'm sending you into the past to seek out D'Vann himself," the Sorceress answered.

"But that's impossible," Adora replied.

Veena flashed a mischievous smile once again. "Nothing is impossible, my child. It's just that some things are not permitted."

"And you are permitted to do this?" Adam asked.

"My siblings and I made the rules, surely I would know a way of bending them?" she said. "Due to the current state of flux that we find ourselves in, I can send you to the proper time," Veena replied, "but I cannot return you here. By the time you return, the natural order of the universe will have been restored. At that point, returning you will no longer be within my power, so it will be up to you to find a way back."

"Alright, so let's just accept the fact that you can send us back to Grayskull's time," Adora said. "What about this prophecy we're supposed to fulfill? How can we fulfill it if we're not here, if we don't know how to get back? You're not even going to give us a hint?"

Veena placed a hand upon each of them. "Do not fear, my daughter. Together, strengthened by the power of Grayskull, the power of Zoar, you and your brother will return. I know this. When you arrive, you will journey to the Nexus of Time and destroy Hordak once and for all. You must, or nothing will survive." She removed her hands, but kept them raised in the air, palms facing the twins. Her hands began to glow a bright white as they looked on. "There is no more time for talk, my children," Veena said. "Teela was right. Time is of the essence." She smiled at her words, realizing their irony. "I will send you near to Grayskull. Keep your identities a secret during your journey," she instructed. "For numerous

reasons, recorded history from that era cannot be aware of your true names. We will meet again soon.” Before either Adam or Adora could reply, the siblings were overtaken by a brilliant flash of light and they felt as if they were falling. Then, there was nothing.

END PART I

PART II

THE AGE OF SERPOS

1.

THE MEETING

Waking with a groan, Adam found himself in a grassy field, his skin and hair wet from a recently fallen rain. He raised himself up on his hands and knees and found that his entire body ached as it never had before. Thankfully, the feeling was fleeting. Electricity crackled in the air around him. It quickly faded, but the feeling of mild static remained, causing the hairs on his arms to stand on end. Looking to his left, he caught sight of a pair of simple leather boots. He glanced up and saw Adora smiling down at him. She was dressed like a poor farmer, although considering what they'd just gone through, it seemed a minor observation. "It's about time you got here," she said. "I woke up about ten minutes ago. I was beginning to worry."

Adam grunted as he got to his feet, brushing his long blonde hair away from his eyes. Smoothing down his beard with his hands, he looked down and saw that his royal armor was also gone, replaced with a simple tunic, loincloth and boots, appropriate to the time. "I guess she dressed us for our roles," he said. He scowled when he saw that their weapons were also gone.

"All I'll say is that I expect my own clothes back when we return," Adora replied, "along with my sword. We'll just have to make due for now without them. She also took my Cosmic Key, but I suppose it's safer with her in Castle Grayskull

than it would be with anyone else.” Adam thought that she seemed surprisingly calm considering the dire circumstances the world had been left in back in their own time.

“You seem oddly unconcerned about all of this,” he said.

“Our worries lie one thousand years in the future, Adam,” Adora replied, looping her hair into a loose ponytail behind her head in an effort to cool herself. Adam had barely noticed the heat yet, but when he did, it came upon him suddenly. He felt himself begin to sweat as she continued. “Veena said that it would be some time before the Three Towers converged and Hordak made his move. I’m sure we’ll find our way back before that happens. In the meantime, this is an opportunity to have a real adventure together, to get to know each other away from the kingdom and your responsibilities as king. That’s something we were never afforded in our own time. Even when I was staying in the palace, I was always on the move, and when I was there, you were usually busy with the affairs of the kingdom.”

“I guess you’re right,” he agreed. “Veena did say that the phenomena would be over soon. Now we just have to be ready to face Hordak when we return.” He took a moment to brush off a bit of the dirt and pieces of grass that had stuck themselves to his simple tunic. “I have to admit that I’m excited at the prospect of meeting King Grayskull himself. The man was a legend in his own time.” He looked around curiously. “Speaking of which, Veena said she’d send us near to Grayskull, but his castle’s nowhere to be found. Why do you think that is?”

His point caused Adora to furrow her brow as she found herself equally confused. She looked around and nodded slowly, an idea forming in her mind. “I expected to see it here too, but there’s no chasm, no peak, and no castle. Maybe they don’t exist yet?”

“Or maybe she meant that she was sending us to Grayskull himself, and not the castle?” Adam reasoned. “I thought we’d find ourselves in his throne room just as before and he’d be right there waiting for us, but that’s obviously not the case. Do you think Veena, I don’t know, misfired?”

“I have no idea, Adam. She’s your goddess,” Adora said with a shrug. “But I’m sure she sent us here for a reason. Maybe Grayskull’s nearby, on some type of diplomatic mission, or something? Anyway, I do see some chimney smoke coming from that village over there.” She pointed to a small town to their west. “Maybe he’s there?”

Glancing in the direction she’d indicated, Adam caught sight of the village himself. “Well then I guess that’s our first stop.”

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Nearly an hour of walking later, Adam and Adora entered the quaint village they'd seen from afar. The townspeople milled about, engaged in various tasks as the twins walked by. The people seemed very poor by modern Eternian standards, their clothes as ragged as the ones Adam and Adora found themselves in. He was disappointed to see that it wasn't at all like the times of prosperity under Grayskull that he'd grown up learning about. In fact, it more closely resembled the poverty that had preceded it, when this area was under the control of King Hiss's Snake Men. Adam could only hope that Grayskull's reputation had preceded them and the people of the village would be eager to help him find the legendary king. Adam approached one of them, a man chopping wood, with caution. "Excuse me, sir," he began awkwardly. "Have you seen the king? King Grayskull?"

The man paused long enough to look the two strangers in the eye cautiously before he resumed chopping, apparently refusing to answer. The siblings continued, asking several others the same question as they made their way to the rather meager village square, but each villager in turn either ignored them or simply shook their head in response. Finding a stone bench near the square, the twins sat down to access the situation. "You're right," Adam said. "It's not going to be easy."

"It never is with us, so why would it start now?" Adora replied, nodding in agreement. "Where do we go from here?"

"I have no idea," he admitted.

"Oi. You two looking for Grayskull?" a woman asked from the open window of a shop to their right.

It took all Adam had not to leap up excitedly. "Yes!" he answered as he stood. "It's of grave importance that we find the king."

The woman gave them both a curious look. "King?" she asked. "That's a laugh. Besides, anyone who lives here knows where he is." She cocked her head toward a building across the street from her shop.

Adam and his sister looked in the direction the woman indicated, but only saw an old combination inn/tavern with a sign in the window that claimed it had the best mead in the valley.

"He's staying there?" Adam asked the woman in the window. It hardly seemed like the kind of place where a king would be.

"You could say that," she said.

Adam nodded appreciatively. "Thank you so much, Milady! You don't understand how much you've helped us!"

"Ha! 'Milady,' this one calls me. If you say so," the woman responded, looking a bit perplexed by the strangers, but amused at the same time.

Adam and Adora walked toward the inn and entered, quickly finding that their eyes had to adjust to the smoky darkness that greeted them inside. An animal pelt cloak that one of the patrons had hung near the door gave off a pungent smell, like wet dog. Adam winced in reaction to it as he walked up to the bar and caught sight of a man who he assumed was the innkeeper, and called him over. The innkeeper put down a wooden bowl he'd been cleaning. "It's a little early," the man said, "but what can I get you?"

"I'm looking for D'Vann Grayskull," Adam said.

"That's him there," he innkeeper answered, pointing to a mountain of a man at a corner table. He was a bit of a contradiction. Hugely muscled and clean-shaven but with long and unkempt blond hair, the man was slumped over what appeared to be an intimidatingly large lion. It was a ligor, Adam realized. The man on its back rose up and down rhythmically as it breathed. "Lazy bastard's been there since last night," the innkeeper continued, "dead drunk, as usual."

"There must be some mistake," Adam said, turning back to the man behind the counter. "I said D'Vann Grayskull."

"No mistake, son," the innkeeper said, pointing at the man once again. "That's him."

"That's really him?" Adora asked. "I thought he was some kind of legendary hero?"

"A hero?" the innkeeper asked. "Grayskull? Heh. Long time ago, maybe. Now he's a drunk and a fool. Follows the goddess Zoar, if you can you believe that," he said, his face incredulous.

Adam looked above the bar and saw a statue of Serpos, the three-headed serpent god's presence giving him a chill as he made the realization that he and his sister were not where, or more accurately when, they thought they were. Grayskull

couldn't be king yet, not with that statue there. Why did Veena send them to before Grayskull was king? "Zoar, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah. He's mad, he is," the man said. "Hears voices."

"Voices?" Adora asked.

"Is there an echo in here?" he said. "Aye, voices. He used to go about preaching the word of Zoar, helping folks when they needed it, much as you heard," the innkeeper began, "but that was years ago. Now, he's just another vagabond wandering the untamed lands. Comes in here every month or so to drink up my supply while that blasted animal eats it." The innkeeper leaned forward. "Look, you two seem like decent, Serpos-fearing folk, so take old Thuldor's advice: I'd steer clear of that one, if I were you. Time catches up to us all, and it caught this one long ago. Best to leave him be."

Adora nodded slowly, not sure what to think, but Adam saw that she had also recognized that something was clearly wrong. "Well, I'm afraid we don't have a choice," she replied. "We must talk to him, but thank you."

"Just don't let him try to convince you to buy him another drink. He has much more and I'll be out of stock again." The innkeeper scoffed and returned to cleaning the wooden bowl in his hands by spitting into it and used his saliva instead of water, wiping it with his tunic. Adam and his sister turned away and walked cautiously toward the man in the back slumped over the giant cat.

"Remind me not to order a drink," Adora said with a disgusted expression.

Empty bottles were strewn about all around the man the innkeeper had indicated. Ten were on the table and at least a dozen more surrounded him and his feline companion on the floor. "D'Vann Grayskull?" Adam asked cautiously. Stirring slowly, the man looked up at them, brushing his long blond hair away from his face to reveal blue eyes glazed over from the drink.

"Who's asking?"

"My name is He-Man," he said, remembering Veena's command not to reveal their identities. "This is my twin sister She-Ra."

"She looks a lot younger than you," the man observed. "Twins, you say?"

"It's a long story," Adam replied. He leaned forward and spoke in hushed tones. "Zoar sent us to ask for your help."

Hearing Zoar's name, the man stood up quickly, looking Adam intently in the eyes. "Zoar?" he asked, swaying violently.

"Yes," Adora said. "We need you to take us to the place where you got your power. The power of Grayskull."

"The power," he stammered, "of Grayskull?" The man laughed heartily and a huge grin spread across his face before he calmly turned his head, vomited, and proceeded to fall backward in an unconscious heap. He landed on the ligor once more, which simply grunted in response and continued sleeping.

Adora looked to Adam, who stared at the man he'd grown up hearing tales and legends of, now sprawled out on the tavern floor with his pet, as drunk as either of them had ever seen anyone in their lives. Her brother was speechless. "I hate to say 'I told you so,' He-Man," she said, a touch of humor to her voice as she said the name, "but this isn't going to be easy at all."

2.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

“So much for the power of Grayskull,” Adam commented sourly as he and his sister once again dunked their ancestor’s head into the water of a horse trough behind the tavern in their so far unsuccessful attempt to wake him from his drunken stupor.

“I don’t know about that,” Adora replied, “his projection had some power to it.” She grunted with effort as they pulled the man back up, all while he sputtered the filthy water and rambled incoherently.

“Not funny,” Adam said shortly.

“It was a little funny,” she argued playfully.

Adam looked to his twin sister as Grayskull turned and slumped against the trough, sitting on the ground at their feet. “I don’t know how you can find this so amusing. Without his help, we’re doomed. All of us.”

Adora sighed slightly. “He-Man,” she began, careful not to use his birth name in case Grayskull was awake enough now to hear them, “all I’ve known my entire life is The Horde. I know what’s at stake, but since I’ve joined the Great

Rebellion, I've also learned to appreciate the humor that life presents us whenever I can. It's usually fleeting."

Adam nodded with a slight smile. "Okay, I'll admit that it was a little funny. A little. But we still need to get him sobered up and find out what he knows. He's been granted great strength from something. That much is obvious just by looking at him. He has to tell us what he did to get it."

"And how are we going to convince him to help us, exactly?" she asked. "We can't let him know where we're from, or he'll think we're crazy."

He shrugged. "I think we should stick with the 'sent here by Zoar' approach. According to the innkeeper, Grayskull follows the goddess, even though the rest of the people around here worship Serpos. That makes us unique."

"Besides that, it's the truth," Adora said.

"Well, there is that," Adam admitted before hearing a groan coming from the man sitting at his feet, who was finally coming to. Adam would just have to trust that Veena sent them to this time for a reason. Maybe Grayskull being king didn't really matter, not for their mission.

"Where am I?" Grayskull asked.

"Behind the tavern," Adam answered.

"Where is Granger?"

"Granger?" Adam asked.

"The ligor," Grayskull said, enunciating the word very carefully, already sounding exasperated at having to explain.

"Oh," Adam said, "he's sleeping it off in the barn across that field." He pointed to the large wooden structure a few acres away from where they stood.

"Endearing you to your neighbors, I'm sure," Adora said. "He looks like he could eat a half dozen farm animals if he were hungry enough."

Grayskull moaned slightly as he stood up, standing nearly a head taller than Adam. His height, combined with his wide shoulders and peak physical condition made for an intimidating presence. "These people are not my neighbors," he said coolly.

"The innkeeper seemed familiar enough with you," Adam commented.

"Of course he is," Grayskull acknowledged with a slight slur. "He has good mead." He paused, looking around at the village that surrounded them. "But these people are Serpos worshippers. They are no friends of mine, or yours if you truly follow Zoar as you say."

"You remember that?" Adora asked, surprised at his lucidity considering the amount of mead he'd consumed prior to their arrival.

"I remember," he said simply. "What I want to know is why it took her so long to send you."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked.

"What I mean is that Zoar told me that she'd chosen me. She allowed me to gain my power. She said she'd call upon me. That was eight years ago." Grayskull's countenance grew dark as he continued. "Eight years!" he shouted. "Eight years that I have waited, at times doubting my own sanity and whether or not I had actually seen her at all. I have served her loyally, but have earned nothing but scorn from this... this den of vipers!" He indicated the village surrounding them. "And many others like it across these lands. Now you two say that you were sent by her, but from where and to what end? This world has been lost to King Hiss for so long now that I don't know if I can ever win it back."

"You will," Adam replied.

Grayskull glanced at Adam curiously. "So sure of that, are you?"

Adora shot her brother a look that told him to remain silent and he did, remembering that he had to be careful not to give Grayskull too much information as to who they were, much less that they knew at least some of his future. "What my brother means is that we believe in you. Zoar believes in you."

The future king scoffed. "She has a strange way of showing it." He turned from them and walked around to the front of the tavern, sobered by his anger. He began following the main road, seemingly intent on leaving the village behind.

"Don't you want to get Granger?" Adam asked him.

Grayskull shook his head. "No. He joins me when he wishes to. It is his way."

Adora had stopped to look back at the barn where Granger was asleep and had to jog to catch back up to the two men. "Where are we going?"

Grayskull looked at them both, obviously annoyed that they were following him. "Away from here," he said shortly, "and you two have yet to tell me your purpose. Why did Zoar send you?"

"To find out the source of your power, so that we may access it as well," Adam replied honestly.

Grayskull laughed. "Is that so?" he asked. "And why would she ask this of me? Am I not enough of a champion for her, that she has to send you?"

"You are her champion, destined to accomplish remarkable things in this time. We, however, are from another," Adora answered, still careful not to say too much.

"Another what? Time?" their ancestor asked.

"Yes," Adora said cautiously.

The hulking man shook his head while a slight smile played across his lips. "And they call me crazy," he remarked, more to himself than to either of them.

"It's hard to explain," Adam said, "but it's true. We face a great enemy in our time and Zoar sent us to you to get the power because she is not supposed to directly interfere."

"Is that what she told you?" Grayskull asked with a slight huff, followed by a laugh. "She interferes plenty, just not when you need her to."

"The source of the power, whatever it is, no longer exists in our time," Adora explained. "That's why she sent us here. That's why we need you."

Grayskull continued walking ahead of them, not looking back as he spoke. "Then you are out of luck, strangers. The source no longer exists in this time, either."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked, feeling a touch of panic gripping him.

"It has been lost," Grayskull answered. "Lost to King Hiss. That entire area is now under the control of that vile creature and his Snake Men."

"But then how will we be able to complete our mission?" Adora asked.

Grayskull continued walking, but turned slightly to give Adora a wry smile. "Perhaps your mission isn't what you think it is," he said with a shrug. "The gods can be funny that way. You two will have to find the answer to that riddle on your

own. Do not expect her to help you." Turning to the road ahead once more, Grayskull fell silent and refused to answer any more questions that day.

• • •

Adam and Adora warmed themselves near the fire they'd made in the center of their camp. Adora couldn't help but notice how sullen her brother had become. "He's not what you expected," she stated matter-of-factly.

"No," Adam replied, sneaking a glance at Grayskull's sleeping form nearby, "he's not."

"He's human, He-Man," Adora reasoned, "just like you and me. The legends you grew up with—"

"Were lies," he interrupted.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. All legends grow from a seed of truth, Brother. The Grayskull you heard about is in there somewhere, you just have to strip away the fantasy and your own preconceptions."

"Do you really believe that?" Adam asked.

"I do," she answered. "If Zoar really is a goddess, or more than that if we're to believe her, then I feel like she sent us to this particular time for a reason, and I don't just mean for our own mission. Like Grayskull said, maybe she had some other purpose in sending us here."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Well, Grayskull's supposed to help us find the source of his power, but maybe we're here to help him find his own inner power. He seems to have forgotten it over the years. Besides, she sent us to a time before he became," she paused, careful not to say the word 'king,' in case the man was not truly asleep, "all that he's destined to be," she said instead. "There has to be a reason for that."

"I don't know," Adam said cautiously.

Adora smiled warmly. "He-Man, you see the goodness in others more easily than I ever could. Your belief in the human spirit is inspiring. If you look at him, really look at him, you'll see it too. He's lost. He's spent the past eight years waiting for Zoar to call upon him. I would imagine that that amount of time is no more than

a blink of an eye to her, but to him it must have felt like forever. What a torturous existence for someone who was once so sure of his own righteousness. We just need to convince him that we are sincere, that he's finally been called upon, and that his wait is over. If we can renew his faith in Zoar, then maybe we can help guide him to becoming the man from your legends."

Adam remained silent for a long moment before speaking. "I suppose that it won't hurt to try," he agreed. "It's not like we're going anywhere."

"We all go through dark periods in our lives," Adora reasoned. "I know that more than most. We'll see him through his, you'll see."

• • •

Adora and Adam awoke early the next morning only to discover that Grayskull was nowhere to be found. His few personal possessions were missing from the camp and the twins assumed the worst: that he'd left them behind. "Well that's just great," Adam remarked sourly.

"We'll find him," Adora replied. "We already know which direction he's been traveling in. We just have to keep up enough of a pace to catch up to him."

"So much for helping him through his 'dark period,' as you put it," Adam said. "He obviously doesn't want us around." He kicked a nearby rock in annoyance and frustration, watching it roll down the green hill to their right, not far off the road.

"You have to put yourself in his boots, Adam. We're strangers to him and he doesn't seem like the type of person that has a lot of friends," she replied. "There's no telling what he's thinking now with us dropping in his lap, telling him Zoar sent us. He seemed like he'd all but given up, and now we've told him that it's time for his mission, his purpose in life. That'd be strange for anybody."

"Stop making excuses for him," Adam grumbled. "He already said that it's up to us now to discover a way to the source of his power, so we may as well continue on without him. He obviously has no interest in anyone but himself."

Adora sighed softly. She understood her brother's frustration. King Grayskull had been his childhood hero, and meeting him in person had shattered that illusion. She had had a similar experience during her time with The Horde. "Did I ever tell you about Lord Draco?" Adora asked.

Adam shook his head, a bit confused by the seemingly random question.
“No.”

“Lord Draco is a high-ranking general of The Horde, often acting as emissary when Hordak doesn’t want to waste resources on a war. A Dark One that once ruled a planet in the outer part of the Tri-Solar System called Nocturnia, Draco is usually intimidating enough to convince entire planets to surrender without a fight. In the instances where it did become a war, Draco always shined. All throughout my youth, Shadow Weaver had educated me on the history of The Horde, and Draco’s victories tallied within those scrolls were numerous. As a child, I admired Draco; respected him. In fact, I wanted to be just like him. In many ways, he was my hero. When I reached maturity and became Force Captain, I finally got the chance to meet him at one of the annual tributes and I was thrilled at the opportunity.”

“And?” Adam asked, genuinely curious.

“It was a disaster,” she replied. “He had a bloodlust that was appalling, even by Horde standards. He was also a womanizer. He actually had the audacity to try his games with me before Hordak put a stop to it. I used to think it was because Hordak was protecting me as a father would. I know now that he was just protecting his favorite weapon’s secret of being human, but that’s beside the point. The point is that Draco didn’t live up to my expectations of him and I hated him for it.” She looked at her brother and shrugged slightly. “That is until he saved my hide on the battlefield months later. In the field of battle, he was everything the stories said he was. His actions during that fight didn’t erase the fact that he wasn’t what I had expected, or that he was a monster, but they showed me that there was some truth to those legends after all. I just had to witness it.”

“So, you’re likening this Lord Draco to Grayskull?” Adam asked.

She nodded. “Yes, but with one major difference.”

“And what is that?” he inquired.

“Unlike Draco, Grayskull is a good man, with a good heart. I can see it. We just have to remind him.” As she spoke, they heard a rustle from the bushes behind them and turned to see Grayskull emerge with his pack. In his hand was a sharpened stick with three large fish skewered upon it.

“I caught us some breakfast,” he said curtly as he sat near the embers of their fire from the night before. He sounded hurt.

"I'll get some more wood," Adora said as she turned and left Adam with his own childhood hero.

"Did you hear us?" Adam asked, embarrassed by Grayskull's sudden arrival.

"I heard enough," the man replied.

"Look," Adam began, walking to the remains of the fire and sitting down himself, "I don't want it to seem like—"

"Do not apologize," Grayskull interrupted. "No matter what it is that you think I should be, this legend you obviously hold close to your heart, I know that I am not it. However, I also know that I am not what I once was. These last few years, I have been," he paused, searching for the proper words to express his thoughts, "lost. Confused. Even angry. Angry at Zoar for abandoning me despite my service to her." The large warrior looked up and pointed the skewering stick toward the man whom he had no idea was his descendant. "But now she has sent you," he nodded toward the woods, "and your sister. I had to spend some time alone this morning to gather my thoughts. I do not know why it is that I believe you two, but I do, and if Zoar is finally calling on me, finally remembering me, then I shall answer her. It is my duty."

Adam knew of course that Grayskull would one day marry Zoar's human form of Veena, although he wasn't sure if the future king would be aware of his wife's dual identity. Still, Adam knew one thing for certain. "I don't think Zoar ever forgot you," he said. "You left an impression."

Grayskull merely nodded. "Aye, perhaps that is so, though I'm not sure why."

"Perhaps because she saw the goodness in you," Adam said. "Your inner strength is likely what she loves about you; why she chose you."

Grayskull chuckled as Adora returned with a new bundle of kindling and a few short logs. "I'm not sure that Zoar loves much of anything," he said, "but she saved me from the Snake Men and their god Serpos is a cruel one that I want no part of. No matter her faults, I have chosen her, just as she claimed on that fateful day to have chosen me."

Adora smiled at Adam, happy to see that he and Grayskull seemed to be getting along. She placed the kindling down first before adding the logs in a pile. "So where are we headed?" she asked as she got the fire going once more.

Grayskull began cooking the fish and nodded to the east. "That way, toward the center of Hiss's kingdom."

"I assume we'll be seeing battle?" Adam asked.

"Most definitely," Grayskull acknowledged with a nod, "so we must first visit someone I know and get you two some proper weapons and armor. If you keep wearing those rags, you'll be mistaken for escaped slaves. We don't need that kind of attention. Wearing armor will make your being bothered less likely."

"And who might this person be that we're going to see?" Adora inquired.

"An old ally of mine named Nikolas Powers, the ruler of Zalesia," he answered.

Adam stared at Grayskull as the man calmly rotated the fish while they cooked. Adora gave her brother a small shrug, unaware of the man Grayskull spoke of. Adam knew the name well however, having met Powers in their proper time, more than a thousand years from the one they found themselves in presently. The Zalesian ruler, Adam knew, would one day be cursed to become The Faceless One. Even more importantly, the man was Evelyn's father.

3.

THE SHINING CITY

The kingdom of Zalesia stood shining in the desert sun, the ram-headed architecture just as impressive now as it would come to be under Keldor's rule. Adam gazed upon the city in astonishment for it appeared no different than it had when he'd been here mere days before in his own time. Keldor truly had risen it back to its former glory. The city looked so similar, in fact, that Adam had to remind himself that that trip only days earlier wouldn't actually occur for more than one thousand years from this moment. It was almost too much for the mind to comprehend. Walking alongside his sister, the two siblings followed D'Vann Grayskull into the unknown. Although Adam had been in Zalesia recently, this would be the first time he would see the native Zalesians, for they had been wiped out generations before his birth. He wondered how long it would be before they met their end. He wasn't sure exactly what year he was in. How long would it be before Serpos wiped out every man, woman and child that called this city home? Years? Days? He paused in thought, not wanting to consider the worst-case scenario. Could it be only hours? Could he warn them, or would changing the past to such a degree cause a ripple effect that would only make things worse for everyone? Upon reflection, Adam found that time travel was not only confusing, but troublesome. How could he meet the Zalesians with the burden of having to

keep their fate a secret? Why must so many moments in his life be wrought with difficult decisions? As he took in his surroundings, Adora caught his eye and smiled at him. To her, this was a great adventure; a chance to spend time with him and learn the history of her birth-world. His sister's optimism was something he wished he could share but he also had to remember that, despite their being twins, being raised on different planets and dimensions had aged each of them differently. Adora was, in reality, still very young compared to him. He also envied that, in some ways. Adam longed for her youth and optimism, but the truth of the situation was that they would soon be led into the very heart of King Hiss's kingdom and that knowledge, along with that of Zalesia's fate, were not the only things that filled him with dread. Their very future rested on their success here in the past, and he wasn't even sure what it was they were sent here to accomplish.

Adam knew in his heart that Adora was no fool, that she understood the dire situation that they found themselves in, so how could she remain so cheerful? Had her life been so full of darkness that even this, a mission to save the universe itself, surrounded by enemies in a time that was not their own, seemed like a joyous occasion? Not for the first time, he admired her strength of character and reminded himself that his dread would bring victory only to his enemies. He saw the strength in her smile and returned it, hoping to elicit even a modicum of her confidence. It was easy to understand how the rebels of Etheria had bolstered their numbers greatly under her leadership. She commanded respect, but also exuded a feeling of hope that was powerful and perhaps her greatest strength, power of the Sorceress and Grayskull be damned. With her at one's side, it was difficult not to be inspired. His smile increased at the thought, no longer an effort, but genuine. As if sensing his earlier discomfort, Adora stepped closer and embraced him from the side for a moment before releasing him. She gave him a look that told him that they were in this together, to whatever end. He nodded and looked ahead once more.

Approaching the large golden gate that separated Zalesia from the desert that surrounded it, D'Vann turned back and gave them each a grin of his own. "Welcome to Zalesia, my friends." Seeing Grayskull, the sentries at the gate opened it without word, nodding to the three of them as they entered. Adam spent a moment taking in the sight of the original Zalesians. He'd always thought of them as a race unto themselves, and perhaps they were, but the inhabitants of the city itself were surprisingly diverse with both human and non-human inhabitants amongst their numbers. From Quadians to Avionians, he was surprised at the multitude of races and species that called ancient Zalesia home. He even spotted one or two members of the elusive Gar race. The only real constant among the citizens of Zalesia was their desert attire, primarily consisting of long, loose-fitting

robes; the light fabric keeping them cool in the heat of the noonday sun. A large number of those robes were hooded, but many citizens also wore jewels and headdresses, the splendor of which was hard to imagine existing in what people of Adam's time had considered to be a dark age of serpentine rule. Zalesia reminded Adam of Eternia in a way, and it seemingly filled a similar role in its day as a hub of culture, refined sensibilities, and learning. Many a Zalesian could be seen reading from scrolls, and as Adam and his companions passed, he noticed that several stood on crates within the city square and dispensed philosophy and wisdom to the crowds that had gathered around them. *Losing Zalesia must have been such a loss to Tellus, Adam thought. To have such an advanced culture extinguished and rendered mere legend. It's no wonder that the fall of Zalesia is still talked about, more than a thousand years after its occurrence.*

D'Vann pointed toward the Zalesian temple that loomed large over the city square and spoke up for the first time since entering the gates. "That is our destination, Warriors of Zoar, for it is the home of my old friend Nikolas. He has a vast collection of antiquities and weapons. Surely you will be able to find something amongst them that suits you."

"And he'll just let us have them?" Adora asked.

"Have no fear. Nikolas may have a treaty with King Hiss, but he is no friend of the foul creature. Once he learns of our mission, he will welcome the opportunity to assist us."

"A treaty with Hiss?" Adam questioned. "I find it hard to believe that such a thing could be accomplished. From what I've heard, Hiss doesn't believe in peace."

Grayskull shook his head. "Aye. I must admit that I do not fully understand it myself, He-Man, but Zalesia is a powerful city and while Hiss has considerable numbers under his command, they are spread thin at the moment. He could not withstand an attack from Zalesia."

"These people don't seem like the warrior type," Adora commented as they approached the temple steps. Adam of course knew well the warrior that hid beneath the surface of her own unassuming exterior.

Grayskull laughed. "Do not let them fool you, She-Ra. They are educated, yes, but nothing is more dangerous than an educated mind," he tapped the side of his head as he spoke the words. "While Hiss is powerful, he thinks with cold reason alone, and a lust for power that often supersedes it."

"Then why do the Zalesians not attack Hiss and end his rule?" Adora asked. "If they can beat him, why do they hide here in their city?"

"The Zalesians have the power to go to war, but more importantly, the intellect to understand the consequences of losing such a war: the loss of their great culture. They would never initiate a war with King Hiss unless they had either no choice or the full conviction that they would be victorious when it was over."

"So instead they treaty with that monster?" Adam asked, his anger at the thought of such a thing revealing itself within the tone of his voice. This was nothing like his own Council of Kings, which called his uncle Keldor a member. Keldor had been reformed, and the threat of Skeletor was a thing of the past. Hiss was a slaver, and a brutal king by all historical accounts. To treaty to with such a foul being seemed wrong.

Grayskull sighed. "There is much that you do not understand, He-Man. The treaty with Hiss was not by Nikolas's choice. He is no king, and is bound to what the Elders command."

Adora shot her ancestor a puzzled look. "The Elders?"

Grayskull stopped and turned, placing his massive hands on each of their shoulders. "The Council of Elders. Those who lead the world of men, small though that world may currently be. Come, let us meet with Nikolas. Perhaps he will explain things better. I've never been one for history or teaching, let alone both. Besides, I hate politics."

Turning back once more and leading them into the temple, Grayskull nodded to the guards stationed on either side of the doorway in turn, and Adam and Adora each did likewise, following his lead. Unlike Grayskull, Adam had studied his history as a boy and knew that while Grayskull worshiped Zoar, the Zalesians instead followed a horned god named Havok. He was unsure how Grayskull and the people of this city seemingly managed to get along so well. It was more likely, especially in these dark times, for two different religious groups to go to war with each rather than to be welcomed into each other's homes. He supposed it was possible that the two gods co-existed within their own lexicon, but he was unfamiliar with Havok. After Zalesia's destruction by Serpos, most of its records and history were lost, including much regarding the Havokian religion. Due to this, Adam found himself anxious to meet Powers, not only because of his friendship with Grayskull, but because Adam knew so little about him, other than a bit about his family. Adam knew that Nikolas Powers was Evelyn's father, or at least would be some day. In his own time, as He-Man, Adam had met Powers, but by that point the Zalesian leader had long been cursed as The Faceless One, a lonely sentinel of the Zalesian

temple who guarded the artifacts that survived. Adam wondered how this meeting would go and how friendly the mysterious man would be to him and his sister. How much like his daughter would he be?

Making their way inside the large structure, Adam took in his surroundings with a sense of wonder. In his time, Keldor had restored the temple to a stunning and beautiful home, but even he would not believe the splendor that Adam and Adora were seeing here. The temple was in its prime. Artwork of innumerable styles and medias surrounded them, much of it hanging from the walls, both paintings and tapestries and hanging wall sculptures. Larger sculptures and statues rested on marble pillars spread evenly throughout the room, most of them representing the various races that called Zalesia home; all of them beautiful to their own people, glorifying what each race viewed as the highest levels of physical perfection. Even those that other races may consider grotesque were beautiful in their own way, whether it be the level of detail and attention given to each sculpture or the overall effect of the piece. He noticed Adora examining them as well. She had always been a fan of art. Her room within Eternos Palace was still decorated with pieces she'd collected during her stay there. If she had been raised in Eternia, rather than taken to Etheria, Adam had no doubt that she would have become something of an artist, herself. The sound of a man's voice snapped Adam's thoughts back to the task at hand. "Greetings, Grayskull. I see you've brought friends." Nikolas Powers walked toward them from an ornate chair that, if Zalesia had been a monarchy, would have been called a throne.

"Yes, Nikolas. I hope that you do not mind," Grayskull replied. "The twins are my allies and are accompanying me on my current journey."

"Of course not." Powers's voice was soft, but cool, Adam thought; almost cold, as if he were hiding something. He stood a head shorter than the giant that was D'Vann Grayskull, but was impressive in his own way. His close-cropped hair was almost pure white, much like Evelyn's, and his eyes were an icy blue. He wore elaborate purple and black robes that flowed elegantly as he walked. They were obviously made of the finest materials, the likes of which few in this age would be able to see outside of this shining city. Powers's face seemed to be chiseled from granite, with no soft edges, giving him an unfriendly appearance that Adam couldn't help but find unsettling, despite Grayskull's vouching for him. Suddenly, the Zalesian leader approached them and warmly extended his hand in greeting to Adora. "And you are?"

"She-Ra," Adam's sister answered.

"She-Ra," Nikolas repeated. "A lovely, if interesting, name." He turned to Adam next, the man's hand reaching for his. "And you?"

"My name is He-Man," he replied, perhaps a little too coolly.

"You have a very firm handshake, He-Man," Nikolas said, causing Adam to realize that he was gripping the man's hand quite tightly. He loosened it immediately.

"I apologize," he said.

Nikolas laughed. "Nonsense," he said with a grin. "With friends like D'Vann, I would expect no less. The first time we met, the man nearly broke my hand."

"That's because you were cheating in that game of stones I'd joined," Grayskull said with a boisterous laugh.

"Ah, yes," Nikolas replied, raising his index finger and pointing it at his friend, "though you were never able to prove that." He glanced back to Adam and his sister and hooked his thumb toward Grayskull. "And he never will, but he's remains a sore loser." With a smile, the man stepped back and took in the group as a whole. "So," he paused, "why are you here, may I ask? Looking to get into some trouble?" He had a twinkle in his eye as he said the words.

"You know me all too well, old friend," Grayskull replied. "Yes, we do seek trouble," he let his lighter words hang in the air before adding the heavier ones, "of the serpentine variety."

Nikolas sighed, openly frustrated. "D'Vann, you are my friend, but you know that I cannot act against them. The treaty forbids it. Without the treaty, my people would become poor—"

"Like the rest of the world?" Adam interrupted. Grayskull and Adora both shot him surprised looks, Adora even hissing his codename under her breath. Adam shrugged. He couldn't help it. He didn't trust Nikolas. He didn't know why, but the man made his skin crawl.

Powers waved away the concerns of Adam's companions. "Oh, it's alright. I'd rather have us all speak freely with each other than play games. I get enough of those from the Council of Elders and Hiss. Yes, He-Man, if the treaty were broken, my people would become as poor as much of the rest of the world. This deal with Hiss goes against my own desires, more than you can know, but as a leader I have to look beyond my personal feelings. I must take care of my people;

keep them fed; keep them protected. The money we get from trade with the Snake Men helps us prosper.”

“At the sacrifice of your neighbors?” Adam asked. “Your integrity?”

Without pause, Powers answered. “Yes, He-Man, of course. I would do anything for my people.”

Adam wondered if that were true. Even amongst all the riches that Adam had seen since arriving, much of the splendor of Zalesia had been within Powers’s own home, and upon his person. However, Adam decided to keep any further comments to himself. This was neither the time nor the place for debate. Still, the fact that Zalesia prospered due to trade with the Snake Men turned Adam’s stomach. The Snake Men were slavers, torturers. How Grayskull approved, he did not understand. According to legend, he’d once been a slave himself. Adam now wondered whether or not that story was even true. He’d found that the man himself was quite different than what the legends had taught him in his youth. Perhaps he could chalk D’Vann’s ignoring the inappropriateness of trade with Hiss up to the fact that Grayskull knew Powers so well. He obviously trusted the man. Then again, Adam knew from experience that not all snakes have scales.

“Forgive He-Man, Nikolas. He does not understand the situation and is unfamiliar with the council,” Grayskull said in an attempt to relieve the tension in the room. “I would of course never ask you to betray your treaty, as foul as we all agree that it is. I would simply ask that you arm us for our quest, which would be unknown to you of course. My companions’ weapons were lost during their journey.”

Nikolas gazed intently upon Adam and his sister, eyes narrowed. “A journey from where, I wonder, or perhaps when?” Adam was startled as the man was surprisingly close to the truth. He knew Powers was a sorcerer. It was possible that he could somehow sense that they were from the future. “It’s strange that they would not understand the treaty and seem to have never have even heard of the Council of Elders,” Nikolas continued. “What manner of journey did these siblings take?” He paused only momentarily before the intense look upon his face suddenly broke into a smile once more. “No matter, they are your friends and you and I go back many years.” He turned to Grayskull once again. “I will do what I can. I cannot go against Hiss openly, but gifting weapons and armor to an old friend and his comrades does not go against the treaty, at least not directly.”

“We are in your debt, Nikolas,” Adora offered. “Thank you.”

Nikolas smiled once more, but the warmth was gone. "Of course, and as is the case any time we go against Hiss in secret," he paused, seemingly amused at his own joke, "don't mention it."

4.

THE ARMORY

Adam remained silent as he, Adora and their ancestor D'Vann Grayskull were led by Nikolas Powers, the leader of Zalesia, to his treasure chamber hidden deep below the city. Unlike his companions, Adam had been here before, in his time, years earlier. At that time, he had been led here by Evelyn Powers, Nikolas's daughter. He found the similarity of the two situations disconcerting, but he knew that the Goddess must have a plan and that he just needed to trust in it. As they walked, Nikolas, now free of any potential eavesdropping, told them stories of how he occasionally funded a small band of rebels and their raids against Hiss's Snake Men, despite the treaty that he was bound to. The key was that he had to make absolutely sure that he could never be identified as the rebels' benefactor. The more Powers spoke, the more Adam began to believe him. Perhaps, much like Adam's former enemy Evelyn, her father also had goodness in his heart. It was possible that Adam had been wrong to judge him so prematurely. He wagered that his memories of the evils that Evelyn had committed as Evil-Lyn had caused him to distrust her father in much the same way that he had distrusted her for so long, even after she helped him find his father. Adam's coming to trust her had been a lengthy process and he was beginning to feel that maybe he should give her father the benefit of the doubt that he'd refused to give her for so long.

"We're here," Powers announced as they reached the massive entrance to the treasure room.

"Impressive door," Grayskull said with a slight laugh.

"It's meant to be," Powers replied with a smile. He spoke an incantation in the old tongue, causing Adam to wonder absentmindedly if it was still called "the old tongue" in this time period, and the door opened with a loud creak. "It was the intention of my ancestors to instill awe in the privileged few who would visit this place."

"Well, it worked," Adora replied and Adam knew from the sound of her voice that she meant it.

The group walked into the treasure room together, the size of it still surprising to Adam, even though he'd been there before. The walls were lined with many of the same familiar staffs and weapons of magical origin as before, the floor still littered with enchanted coins and jewels. Judging from the look of the pedestals that rose from the floor, each holding its own distinct artifact, it seemed that little about this room would change between now and when Adam would set foot in it once again, centuries later. Looking around the room for one pedestal in particular, Adam caught sight of the Spell Stone which, upon his future visit, Evelyn would give to him and join it with the Sword of Power, transforming it into Adora's Sword of Protection. This wizard named Ro; or He-Ro, depending on the translation; whoever he was, he'd obviously already been here, contrary to the stories Adam had read as a child, which had spoken of Ro and Grayskull as contemporary figures. What was the truth? The only constant to the various legends regarding Ro was that he'd come from another world, stranded here after his ship crashed. After that, things got muddy. Adam wondered if he'd ever know Ro's entire story.

"I already have several things in mind for your journey," Nikolas told them. "There are weapons and armors designed specifically to combat the Snake Men, and also to strengthen you. Each should help you achieve victory." Nodding toward the rear of the room, he motioned for them to follow him. "Much of Zalesia's artifacts are kept here in the main room, but the armory is this way. While no one has ever successfully raided this vault in its long history, the ancients thought it better to keep the more powerful of its treasures separate."

"Considering the sheer number of items stored within the main vault, I'm sure most wouldn't even consider the possibility of there being a second one," Adora said.

"That was indeed part of the idea," Nikolas replied. "While each of these items is powerful in its own right, many of them amount to nothing more than flashy baubles compared to what is hidden. However, 'flashy' is what thieves would likely search out first. That being said, the items I'm about to give you are most impressive, have no doubt of that." Using an old-fashioned electronic key, Nikolas unlocked a hidden door and held it open while the three warriors entered.

"It's surprisingly cold in here," Adam said.

"Yes," Nikolas replied. "We're not sure of the cause, but I feel it's an unnatural one. Magic can be strange sometimes." Not elaborating any further, Nikolas lead them to the rear of the room where several unique sets of armors were stored on metal armatures. Two were incredibly modern looking, and comprised of sleek black armor and material. The remaining two were more traditional, and those are the ones Powers approached. One appeared to be forged from a pearlescent silver metal. Adam wasn't sure of exactly what kind of metal it was, but it seemed magical in its very nature. The other was a heavy armor plate with a red harness over it. The harness itself wasn't too unlike the armor Adam had once worn as He-Man, but rather than the cross-like crest of Grayskull, this one bore an engraving of Zoar's "H" like sigil.

"There are three armors here that I feel will suit your purpose." He approached the large silver set to their left. "This one is for D'Vann, not only due to its size, but its armaments, including a pincer that retracts into the right gauntlet, useful for capturing one of the Snake Men long enough to deal a devastating blow." The armor was ornate, with King Hiss's royal crest, albeit crossed out, an apparent symbol of Zalesia's secret rebellion. Oddly though, the three companions noticed in turn that the left thigh, arm and pectoral area remained uncovered. Following their line of thought, Nikolas continued, "An odd choice, I know. It appears to be unfinished, but the armor is restrictive to movement and it's imperative that the striking arm and left leg each remain unhindered. Hiss's warriors are fast, and you can't afford to be too slow."

"Then it's a good thing I'm left-handed," Grayskull replied with an uncertain half-smile.

"Which is why I thought it would suit you," Nikolas said. "Do not fear, D'Vann, Snake Men tend to go for the neck anyway, and the armored pauldron on the right side should be more than enough to protect you in that event."

"Good to know," Grayskull said.

Powers approached the red harness next. "This is the armored harness of a Zoarian warrior. I thought you'd find this one to be of interest, He-Man. I know a Zoar follower when I see one, although they are nearly extinct these days. You're in good company with D'Vann here." He gestured to his old friend as he spoke.

"Indeed, I am," Adam agreed. "Does this harness have a special perk, as well?"

"Of course," Nikolas replied. "Without one, it would only be here as a novelty. It is said that the most devout Zoar followers could draw upon the eternal fires of the Star Seed itself and use it to deliver thunderous blows." He shrugged lightly. "To be honest, that could all be hogwash, as no one knows if the Star Seed actually exists, but it will certainly protect you more than those rags will."

"I'm sure it will do nicely," Adam said, a little jealous of Grayskull's much more protective armor, considering that Adam didn't have the benefit of being able to transform into He-Man anymore, at least not yet. If all went according to plan, he would soon be able to take on that mantle again. But in his experience, things seldom went according to plan.

"And for me?" Adora asked. "Do I get one of these black ones?"

"No, no," Nikolas replied with a smile. "These ancient Havokian armors are indeed impressive, but both pale in comparison to what I have in mind for you. For you, My Lady, I have another Zoarian armor, once used by her priestesses, it will hide you from prying eyes if you so desire. It is a light in the darkness, blinding to the minions of evil when you tap into its true power."

Adora glanced about the room, but saw no other armor. "Am I missing something?" she asked. "I see no other armors save for these two." She indicated the ones Nikolas had identified as Havokian.

Nikolas grinned. "And that is what makes your new armor quite remarkable." He whispered a short incantation and, without warning, the three warriors had to shield their eyes from a bright light that emanated from beside Adam's new armor. As their vision came back, they suddenly saw another armor before them, its brilliant white and gold continuing to shine brightly before subsiding into a very ceremonial looking gown with armored accents. A gem rested at the center of the gown's chest, ornately decorative armor spiraling outward from it. A flowing cape hung behind the ensemble, clasped at the shoulders and appearing to glint with magical light.

Adora attempted a smile. "As beautiful as it is, it resembles more of a formal dress than armor, Nikolas. I'm not quite sure that it suits me. Are you sure I shouldn't take one of the Havokian ones?"

Nikolas smiled knowingly. "Don't let its appearance fool you. The material of this Zoarian gown is comprised of nearly impenetrable mesh that is said to have been made from a shard of the Star Seed itself. It is the Starburst armor of a warrior priestess, the likes of which none in this age have seen." He reached out and felt the fabrics of the Starburst armor in his hand. "This flexible armor can bend light, effectively granting you invisibility for a time and, with the cape spread wide, that same light can temporarily blind and incapacitate your enemies. It may appear to be a 'formal dress,' as you put it, but it is, most assuredly, the most powerful armor of the three that I am gifting to you."

"I'm sorry," Adora replied. "I meant no offense."

"None taken. Its beauty is indeed deceptive, belying the true power hidden within, but I promise that it will suit you." Powers turned and approached an ornate cabinet in the back of the hidden room. Pulling it open, he revealed its contents which consisted of a collection of armaments. "And now," he continued, "for your weapons." Reaching into the cabinet, he pulled out a large, twin-bladed battle axe and handed it to Grayskull, who took it in his left hand and hefted it, testing its weight as he swung it lightly from left to right and back again. "This axe comes from an ancient settlement that was once located amidst the Mountains of Perpetua," Powers began. "It will never chip or break, and will remain diamond sharp for all of its days. If only the people who forged it had been so resilient. The art of its crafting died with them"

Grayskull smiled. "A fine gift, my friend. I thank you."

Powers nodded. "My only wish is that it serves you well." Reaching into the cabinet for a second time, Powers removed a long red staff, engraved to resemble a serpent. "And this, my dear She-Ra, is the Staff of Ka. It once belonged to The Unnamed One, who led the Snake Men long ago, before they turned to evil following King Hiss's uprising. The irony of the snake staff is that it is most effective against them and like D'Vann's axe, it will never break."

"I'm used to using a sword," Adora began, "but I'm also well-trained in the use of a staff." She thanked him as she took the weapon. She knew it was a great honor to wield it. Seeing a small button along its shaft, she pressed it, collapsing the staff to about a foot in length, perfect for wearing attached to one's belt. Another press, and it sprung back out to its full length.

"And for you He-Man, I have something truly special." Once more, Nikolas reached into the cabinet, this time removing what was unmistakably a sword due to its shape, but it was masked by a red cloak that had been wrapped around it. Removing its covering, Powers revealed the sword to be an exact replica of the Sword of Power, though it was an almost translucent blue and filled with shimmering points of light. Appearing as if it were made of glass, it resembled the night sky in weapon form. It was truly a beautiful thing. "I present to you the Sword of Ro," Nikolas said, "or as I have come to call it, the Star Sword."

Its resemblance to the half of the Sword of Power that Adam once wielded was uncanny. This sword was surely the inspiration Grayskull would go by when it came time for him to forge the Sword of Power an unknown amount of time in the future. Looking to his ancestor and the expression of pure awe that crossed the man's face, all doubt regarding that fact faded. This weapon must have indeed been inspiring to him. Adam himself couldn't help but stop and simply experience the amazing moment of the sword being placed in his hand for the first time. Yet again, a member of the Powers family was gifting him an artifact of the wizard called Ro, and once more, he could feel the power that coursed through it, just as he once had the Sword of Light and later, the Sword of Protection. Something told him that this sword was a part of his destiny. From the look on her face, Adora sensed it too and gave him a broad smile.

"The Star Sword's power is untold, unpredictable, and changes with each bearer." Powers paused, a wry grin crossing his face. "I thought it suited you."

"You have no idea," Adam said. "Thank you."

"Thank you, my friends," Powers replied, "for fighting the fight that I cannot. I will give you each the privacy to don your new armors, but then I must send you on your way. Hiss has eyes everywhere and I fear that I've been away from the city for too long already. My absence is bound to be noticed soon. As full of splendor as it may be, Zalesia is in many ways a prison for me." Adam knew more than anyone here how true that statement was for once Powers became The Faceless One, the city truly would become a literal prison for him, for more than a thousand years. Powers and the men then stepped out, leaving Adora to change in the hidden armory. Adam and Grayskull followed suit shortly after. When they had finished and thereafter exited the treasury, each of them stood in turn, adorned in their new and mystical armors, enchanted weapons in hand. Powers looked upon the three of them in awe, the warriors now standing outside the giant door. "You three truly are a sight to behold. Go, embark on your quest, and may Zoar and Havok both be with you."

Grayskull grabbed his friend and embraced him. "Thank you once again, Nikolas. May Zalesia live forevermore in beauty."

Grayskull's words gave Adam a cold chill, but he knew that he could say nothing, lest he dangerously change the course of history. Without warning, a feeling of dread came over him as he turned to find that Adora was missing. What sorcery was this? Had they been followed? "Where's my sister?" he asked as calmly as he could manage, feeling a bead of sweat forming upon his brow. Shortly after speaking the words, he felt a playful slap against the back of his head. Turning, he saw Adora step out from what looked like a small tear in space itself, accompanied by a quick flash of light as she became visible once more.

"You worry about me too much," she said with a grin. "I was just testing to see if I could get it to work." Nodding to Grayskull and Powers, who appeared quite amused, she began retracing their steps back to the city before stopping and looking back at Adam. "Well? Let's go."

Despite the pang of worry he still felt, Adam couldn't help but smile back at her.

5.

THE ORACLE

Adam, Adora and Grayskull had said their goodbyes to Nikolas and the city of Zalesia nearly a day ago. They currently found themselves surrounded by the dense forests that lead to the Mountains of Gnarl. Grayskull had told them as they left Zalesia that they had to make one more stop to see someone known as "The Oracle." The trip to the location of the fountain of life, or at least where it had once been, was very dangerous, and Grayskull wanted to inquire about their journey before they traveled too far into the densest part of Snake Man territory. Adam had doubts regarding the wisdom of making another stop. Despite Adora's assurances that they had the luxury of stopping due to their being in the past, he was uncomfortable with the thought of possibly stopping one too many times and arriving back in their own time period a heartbeat too late. Both he and his sister hoped that they would return to the same moment that they'd left, but he didn't want to leave anything to chance. Taking a deep breath, the king forcibly calmed himself, or at least tried to. Bringing his mind back to his surroundings, Adam couldn't help but notice that it had gotten dark rather suddenly. Was there a storm coming? It couldn't be night already.

"There it is," Grayskull said, breaking the silence. "I had forgotten just how far it was." The man pointed to the sky, and to the floating fortress that hovered high above the trees, blocking the sun. That explained the darkness. From the fortress, a long spiral ramp led all the way to the ground. Grayskull led them to a small clearing and, within it, an archway at the base of the ramp itself. At first glance, the ramp appeared far too slick and steep for one to climb, but as Grayskull approached it, it magically transformed into stairs. Many, many stairs. Following the spiraling staircase with his eyes, Adam had no doubt that there were hundreds of steps to climb on the way to the top, maybe more than a thousand. "Ah, good," D'Vann said. "We are welcome." He turned to Adam and his sister. "I hope you're not tired of walking," he said with a laugh as he began climbing.

Adam groaned. "'It'll be fun,' you said. 'We'll bond,' you said."

"C'mon, old man," Adora replied with a laugh. "He hasn't led us astray yet." She began making her way up the steps behind Grayskull and, with a slight sigh, Adam followed.

"Yeah, but he's got the power that Zoar gave him, and you," he paused, "well, you're younger than me," he finished with a slight laugh.

"Just try to keep up," Adora replied, "and don't break a hip."

Adam shook his head as they made their way. "Very funny," he said, unsuccessfully fighting the grin that spread across his face. "I'm not that much older."

The journey to the top of the staircase took longer than Adam wanted to think about and by the time they reached its apex, his legs burned and he had to constantly remind himself not to look down, lest he be overcome with feelings of vertigo. He was thankful to finally step off the staircase and onto what felt, despite their height and the fact that the fortress was hovering magically, to be stable ground. The fortress itself was fairly small, about the size of a modest house, and surprisingly open to the elements. It consisted of a large circular platform and a roof to match, with great marble columns that ran around the circumference of the fortress connecting the two. In the center was a throne, if you could call it that for Adam found it to be surprisingly modest, and seated upon it was an old man. The Oracle was bent forward, as if his spine had begun to twist with age. The blue hue of the man's skin gave Adam reason to suspect that the Oracle was a Gar, but there was no way to know for sure as a great black and silver cloak surrounded the man, its hood drawn up over his head, hiding most of his features from view. The rest were masked by a long white beard, with the exception of his eyes which were alert

and vibrant and, to Adam's surprise, fixated on him specifically. After a long moment, the man's eyes moved to Adam's sister and Grayskull.

"Greetings, He-Man and She-Ra. I was wondering when I would be able to lay my eyes upon the Twins of Power." The man eyed Adora's Staff of Ka curiously, but said nothing.

"Twins of what?" Grayskull asked.

The Oracle brushed the question away with a sweep of his withered hand and a light laugh, looking away from the staff as he did so. "Oh, I haven't written that prophecy down yet, have I? I keep forgetting. One of these days I will, I'm sure. I must." The man fidgeted slightly in his chair, as if trying to find a sense of comfort that his body and his age no longer provided. "I know much of the twins' time. I've had many visions. Their loved ones are in danger, and yet they are here. Why?"

"Don't you know?" Adora asked.

The Oracle laughed, the sound of it dry and raspy, leading to a slight cough that caused him to clutch his chest in pain. After a moment of discomfort, he continued, "I know many things about the future, but the present sometimes eludes me."

"Are you ill?" Adam asked, genuinely concerned for the old man's well-being.

"No," the Oracle replied. "Just very old."

"How old?" Adora inquired.

The Oracle scoffed. "I stopped counting around my third century. Or was it the fourth? Regardless, I hardly saw the point anymore. Once, I thought I would live forever, but I've learned over time that I simply age very slowly." The elderly man sat as upright as he could manage. "It's not often that I welcome others into my home, largely because, having known a considerable number of people in my years who have come and gone, I have no great attachment to them. Understand: I am not long for this world and my patience thins very quickly these days. I asked you before, why are you here?"

"Forgive us, Oracle. We seek the fountain of life," Grayskull said. "I know of its location, but I wanted to inquire about our task. Is it possible to reach it safely?"

"The Fountain of life?" the Oracle asked. "A tall feat."

"Yes," Grayskull acknowledged.

"To give He-Man back his power? And presumably She-Ra as well?"

"Yes," Adam answered.

The Oracle laughed again, this time longer and more animatedly than before. When the laughter slowly ceased, he spoke once more. "I'm sorry. My life has been long and," he paused, "interesting. Even still, I occasionally find myself surprised at the situations in which the gods place me. Their humor is unique, to say the least."

"Can you tell us anything about our journey?" Adam asked.

The Oracle nodded. "You will succeed in gaining your power, but there will be hardships along the way, as I'm sure you suspect. More than that, your journey leads to a different end entirely. The font is simply a stop along the way toward your true destination."

"What do you mean?" Grayskull asked.

"I'm afraid that if I told you that, it could alter your course," the old man answered. "If there's anything that I've learned as Oracle, it's that some things must remain a mystery." After a short pause, he spoke again, "know this, however: the hardships I speak of are no simple matter. An entire kingdom of serpents stands against you and they would rather devour you whole than allow you to win."

"Then they shall fall before us," Grayskull replied boldly.

The Oracle's smile remained hidden from his guests within his thick beard. "Yes, of course." Standing for the first time, the ancient man's height barely reached their chests, primarily due to his stooped posture. He reached into his robe and withdrew a pink crystal amulet which hung from a silver chain. "She-Ra, come forward, my dear," he said. As she did so, he handed her the amulet. "Keep this close to your heart. You will need it."

"What is it for?" she asked.

"When the time comes, it will show you the way," he answered.

"Thank you," she said, still not fully understanding his meaning, but grateful for the gift, nonetheless.

The Oracle nodded briskly, making a shooing motion as he did so. "Yes, yes. Now go, all of you. I must rest."

"You have no gifts for the two of us?" Grayskull asked.

"No," the man said simply. "Her, I like, though I wish you well on your journey nonetheless."

"Very well," Grayskull replied. "We'll be on our way. Thank you for your hospitality."

Adam couldn't help but wonder whether his ancestor was being sarcastic or not. Before he could complete the thought, there was a flash of light and the three companions found themselves back at the gateway arch on the ground, the stairs once more a slick, smooth surface. "At least we don't have to climb back down," he said.

"I'm sorry," Grayskull began, "I'm afraid that this visit was a waste of our time."

"I'm not so sure," Adora said as she wrapped the amulet's chain around her neck and secured its clasp.

"What do you mean?" Adam asked.

Adora shrugged. "I don't know. There was just something about him." She held the amulet in her hand, tracing its lines with her fingertips. "I'm not sure what this amulet is for, but I feel that we'll be glad to have it before the end of our journey." Letting it hang from her neck, she glanced back up toward Grayskull. "Where to now?"

Grayskull pointed in a southeastern direction. "There, to the mountains of Gnarl. Hiss constructed the Temple of Serpos over the fountain to keep its power out of his enemies' hands, but I'm betting on his not knowing of the secret cave system I used to find it as a lad. The caves lead from the mountains almost directly to the fountain. They were there before the temple and if we're lucky, they are still intact now."

"We can expect that Hiss won't be pleased with our breaking into his temple," Adam said.

"Aye," Grayskull agreed. "Which is why we will sneak in at night and try to grant you both your power before the army of serpents are upon us."

"Sounds like a plan, or at least the start of one," Adora said.

"There is more," Grayskull replied. "No human has seen the inside of the Temple of Serpos, save those Hiss has enslaved or brought there to dine on. Still, legends say that there is no entrance at the temple's base; that the foul serpents slither their way to its apex and enter there. We must do the same."

"Climb?" Adam asked.

"Somehow, some way, yes," Grayskull said. "But for now, we must make camp. Night will be upon us soon and we don't want to enter the Mountains of Gnarl under the light of the moon, save we never leave them. We will continue in the morning."

6.

THE MOUNTAINS OF GNARL

The following morning, the three companions made their way to the jungle mountains, reaching them in the early afternoon. They'd arrived at the edge of the tree line several hours earlier. Neither Adam nor Adora had further inquired about the dangers of the mountains at night, but this was Grayskull's world and if even he feared them, they knew better than to question his reasons. Adora looked ahead to her brother Adam and her ancestor D'Vann. Both were men that she respected. Adam had looked every bit a king in his armor back home, but with this new harness he embodied a warrior. It had been years since she'd seen him, her war with Hordak had had to take priority over her family visitations, and in those years, she found that her brother had grown more and more like their father in appearance. His long hair and beard were well groomed, but made him appear older than he truly was. Adam had been good to her in the year she'd spent living with him and his family in Eternos Palace and she wished she had been able to play a more significant role in her family's lives in the years since. Now, a thousand years in the past, she'd finally been given the opportunity to spend some time with him, dangerous mission or not.

Glancing to D'Vann Grayskull, she felt a sense of awe that surprised her. Adam was the one who'd been raised with stories of this man's legend, but where he'd originally found a sense of disappointment, she'd found hope. Grayskull had yet to prove himself to her as a warrior, but she had no doubt that the legends were true. He could be a bit boisterous and loud, but he carried himself like a king already, joyful in the fact that Zoar had finally called upon him with a mission and, she suspected, happy to have some company. She sensed that the man was lonely and wondered how long it would be before the goddess would reenter his life as the beauteous Veena and steal away his heart.

The Eternian Princess looked to the surrounding jungle mountains and admired their beauty while simultaneously respecting their danger, returning her thoughts to the present. Although many of the jungle's hunters were nocturnal, judging by Grayskull's insisting they enter during the day, surely there were plenty of others that would be more than willing to hunt them during the daylight. It would serve all of them to stay alert. "Is it much further to the cave's entrance?" she asked.

Grayskull nodded, simultaneously wiping the sweat from his brow and the long hair from his eyes. The jungle was hot and wet; the perfect place for the Snake Men to call home. The three warriors' armor was cumbersome in this climate. Only Adora was somewhat comfortable in her flowing gown, though even it was sticking to her with sweat. "Aye," he answered, "but just a bit further. I'll be glad to feel the coolness of the caves after this sweltering misery."

"You and me both," Adam said.

"Even still," Grayskull replied, "once we reach the caves, there will still be some distance to cover."

"If it's out of this humidity, I can deal with the distance," Adam said.

"I am pleased that you remain in good spirits," Grayskull said, "for I fear that before morning they will be a distant memory. Much danger awaits us at the temple."

"Both She-Ra and myself have seen our fair share of battle," Adam said. "We'll be ready when the time comes."

"We are already deep in the serpent king's territory," Grayskull replied, 'but I appreciate your spirit and optimism. There is not much of it left in this world." He clapped Adam on the back fondly. "I welcome it wherever I find it, my friend."

Another ten minutes of walking brought them to a large, vine-covered stone outcropping. Grayskull slowed and stood in front of it. "Why are we stopping?" Adora asked.

Their ancestor turned to them. "Because we are here. It remains much as I remember it, though a bit overgrown." Drawing his battle axe, he knelt and chopped at the vines, low to the ground. When he'd finished, he pulled the vines to the side, revealing the mouth of a hidden cave. Letting go, the vines swung back down, covering the hole once more. "These vines should keep the entrance hidden behind us. They are a hardy breed and will reattach and heal within an hour of our entry. It is unlikely that the snakes will find the entrance, even if they knew to look for it, which I doubt."

"A good plan," Adam said.

Adora nodded. He was right. They would have enough of their enemies ahead of them at the temple. It was a comfort to know that they wouldn't have any at their back as well. "Shall we?" With her words, Grayskull once again parted the vines, allowing Adam and her to enter before he followed. Letting the foliage swing closed behind him, the three found themselves in the near darkness before Grayskull lit a torch she suspected he'd known was nearby. The fire from the torch lit up several different tunnels, each leading Goddess knows where.

"This way," Grayskull said calmly, indicating the left-most tunnel. "It took me days to traverse the tunnels the first time, but back then I did not know the way. Even still, it will take hours to reach the end. We must remain silent. These tunnels are old and house creatures long forgotten. It would be best not to draw their attention."

"But the torch—" Adora began.

"Will not be seen by their blind eyes," Grayskull finished. "But please, use care. Though they cannot see, they have other ways of locating us."

"Thank you for guiding us," Adam said. "For helping us."

Grayskull simply smiled. "I follow the will of Zoar, my friends, though I never suspected that it would lead me back here once more." He made his way into the tunnel. "Now come, we will leave everything but our weapons here. Some of the tunnels will be too narrow if we carry our packs with us."

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Grayskull led them by torchlight through the system of tunnels carefully, but nonetheless as swiftly as he was able. None of them had uttered a word since they'd left the entrance in an effort to remain as silent as possible. They had been making their way through the tunnels for the better part of a day when they reached a small stream and Grayskull indicated to Adora and her brother that they were nearing the end of their journey. "We should be able to speak freely now," the large man said, "though once we leave through the cave ahead, we will once again need to exercise caution."

"Then we should use this time to formulate a plan," Adam said.

"Aye," Grayskull agreed.

"Have you thought of a way for us to scale the temple, if there truly is no entrance at its base?" Adora asked.

"The pincer claw on this new armor of mine could perhaps be used as a means of repelling to the apex," he said. "If that does not work, I will use the enhanced strength given to me by Zoar to climb the tower and will find something to lower down to you and pull you up."

"Depending on what, or who, you find at the top, that might not be the best option," Adam reasoned. "I don't like the idea of you going up alone, even with your strength."

"Which is why I hope the armor will be of benefit," Grayskull replied. "Regardless, we will find a way, but take heed, friends: King Hiss and his Snake Men are dangerous foes. I know not of your home or of your enemies there, but do not underestimate the evil and duplicitous nature of the Snake Men. Many horrors likely await us within the snake god's temple and not all of those who would wish us harm will be as obvious to the eye as our serpentine adversaries. Human slavery and sacrifice are expected from the snakes, but worse still are those humans who are loyal to the false god Serpos and serve his will. They make enemies of their own kind and would do the same to you. We must be wary of any human we come across as they may not be looking for saviors and will do everything in their power to give us away or lead us to our doom. With no easy exit, the human slaves are said to walk the temple as freely as their masters, save for those deemed dangerous or otherwise special in the eyes of Hiss."

"How will we know the difference between the slaves and those there of their own free will?" Adora asked.

"It is likely that we will not be able to know, at least not by sight alone," Grayskull replied. "What I am trying to say is that as we traverse the temple's passages, we must remain hidden from the sight of Snake Man and human alike. I can get you your power, but we do not have a hope of freeing the humans we come across," he paused, lost in thought for the briefest of moments before returning to the present, "at least not yet."

"But it is a goal of yours?" Adam asked, well aware of the fact that Grayskull would one day do just that, he just didn't know when.

"Aye," the man replied, nodding. "One day I will free every man, woman and child enslaved by Hiss, as I once was. I owe that much to the world, at least." After another moment, he continued. "Where we will exit the cave ahead was once dense jungle. I don't know how much it has been changed since coming under Hiss's control."

"Only one way to find out," Adam ventured.

"Indeed. It is time. Good luck," Grayskull said. "For Zoar."

The twins replied in unison, "For Zoar." With that, the three warriors made their way to the exit and peered out into a vast jungle valley surrounded by mountains. Night had fallen, but at the dead center of the valley stood the Temple of Serpos, a towering monument to the god of the Snake Men, lit with fire bowls which hung from chains at various levels. A wall surrounded the base of the temple, itself situated atop a manufactured mountain. A massive sculpture of Serpos wrapped around the tower itself, the giant, three-headed serpent inspiring awe even to their eyes. Either the stories of the shear wall were myths, or the sculpture was a new addition. Regardless, the addition of the winding snake would be a boon to their mission, as it should help give them some purchase during their climb. The smile on Grayskull's face told them that he thought the same. He motioned for them to follow him as he set off toward the temple.

The three companions made their way carefully through the jungle, aware of the fact that Snake Men could be all around them. Adora was thankful for her armor's cloaking abilities, but Grayskull and her brother did not share it and that worried her. She thanked Zoar silently when they reached the edge of the jungle without incident. Before them was a great wall surrounding the base of the mountain. At the wall's center, its entrance was guarded by two Snake Men. One had red and green scales and fierce teeth. The other was mostly green, but appeared to be a different subspecies than the first as it also had a long tail which swished back and forth rhythmically, anticipating, and perhaps even hoping for, some action. It was doubtful that anyone had tried to enter the Temple in recent

memory, but the guards stood vigilantly nonetheless. It was more likely that they were there to keep people in rather than out. Once again, Grayskull motioned for them to follow him as he moved through the edge of the jungle to the left. They circled around the mountain until they came upon its left side. Glancing in either direction, making sure that no additional sentries could be seen, they made their way out into the open and proceeded to the wall.

Once they'd reached it, D'Vann used his great strength to hoist first Adora and then her brother to the top of the surrounding wall. Using his armor's pincer like a grapnel, Grayskull shot it to the wall's peak and pulled himself up to join them. Turning to them, he whispered, "From here we have to make our way up the stone serpent. Keep your eyes open for guards walking the perimeter. It's doubtful that the two at the entrance will be all we'll see on our journey to the temple's apex." The wall itself was several feet thick and more than wide enough for the three of them to stay atop as they continued to circle the structure in search of a secure area to begin their ascent. Once they had travelled nearly back around to the entrance, now on the right side of the mountain, Adam caught sight of the base of the Serpos sculpture's tail. It was low enough that with another Zoar-powered lift by Grayskull, they should be able to reach it. Adam motioned toward it and Grayskull nodded his agreement, clasping his hands and bending his knees as he did so. Adam stepped into the man's hands and felt the air quickly rush by as he was sent airborne once more. For a brief moment, he was afraid that he'd miscalculated the distance as the arc of his trajectory appeared to be falling short of his goal, but he reached with all his might and grabbed the tail with both hands in a rather violent landing before hoisting himself up and onto his belly. A bead of sweat dripped and fell from his forehead as he realized how close he'd come to falling. Looking back to Grayskull, the man shrugged in apology and sent Adora up next. Adam's sister flew over him and landed nimbly on her feet, the Staff of Ka clutched in her hand. Grayskull himself then leapt and again used his armor's pincer to pull himself up to join them once more.

"I'm sorry, my friend," he whispered to Adam with an embarrassed expression, "your new armor is surprisingly heavy."

"It's fine," Adam replied. "It's not the first close call I've had and it isn't likely to be the last."

"Shhh," Adora hissed as she dropped to her belly. Seeing the barred window to their immediate right, the men followed suit, dropping down just in time for a serpentine guard to walk past. When they were sure that he hadn't seen them, they stood up once again and continued upward, walking along the sculpted tail as it wound around the tower. The window had been far too small for any of them to fit

through, but the last thing they wanted was to announce their presence before they'd even made it to the top. Doing so unseen was of the utmost importance for even once they'd reached the temple's apex, they would need to then descend all the way to its depths in their effort to find the font. It would obviously be best to be able to do so in secret. Continuing to make their way carefully along the sculpture, the three of them slowly ascended the tower with no further incidents. The Goddess was with them, at least so far. The three-headed sculpture's middle head rose high above the temple itself and they agreed that it would be their best bet for getting inside.

When they reached the top, Grayskull looked carefully for any sign of a guard before he shot his armor's pincer into the sculpture near his feet and used the pincer's grappling feature to lower himself down to the roof of the temple. So far it had definitely been of use and he thanked his friend Nikolas profusely under his breath. While the cable was still attached, Adora and her brother used it to climb down to join their ancestor before he retracted it back into its forearm sheath. There wasn't much to the top of the temple other than a balcony that overlooked the jungle below and a few more of the fire bowls that seemed to be the temple's primary light source. At the rear of the roof was a large double door that they had to assume led to the rest of the temple.

"Quiet. I thought I heard sssomething." The voice startled them. It had come from the other side of the door. Adam and Grayskull quickly hid in the shadows. Adora used her Starburst armor to bend the light and hide in plain sight. She hadn't been sure it would work at night, but with so little time, she had no choice and was thankful for the light of the fire bowls that surrounded them. The armor worked and she disappeared to the naked eye just as, with a loud creak, the door opened inward. One of the serpentine guards exited the temple, spear at the ready. Seeing a Snake Man up close for the first time, Adora had to suppress a shudder. The terrifying creature's cold, reptilian eyes were fixated on her exact position, the vertical slits of its pupils dilating due to the light of the fire. It turned as it heard the second sentry speak.

"You're hearing thingsss," the other said as it followed the first. "No one has gone passst us."

Adora watched as Adam and Grayskull did just that, slipping into the open door while the sentries were distracted and quickly hiding in the corners of the doorframe. With a shrug, the second Snake Man turned along with his partner and began to walk back toward the door. Quickly formulating a plan, Adora brushed her foot along the rooftop, making a loud scraping sound.

"I told you I heard sssomething," the first said, turning back toward her with a hiss. Continuing to use her cloak to hide her, Adora slipped past the guards and joined her companions within the entrance. With a whispered, "C'mon!" she caught Adam and Grayskull's attention and the three of them made their way quickly down the hall and turned the corner before the sentries could turn back around and see them.

Glancing at the area all around her in order to make sure that they were alone, Adora uncloaked and whispered, "That was too close. Let's go." She and Grayskull began to move carefully down the hallway, but Adam was frozen still, his eyes wildly taking in his surroundings. "What is it?" she whispered.

"I know this place," he whispered back.

"What?"

"I know this place," he repeated. "This is Snake Mountain, or I mean it will be."

"Snake Mountain?" she asked. "Skeletor's lair?"

"Yes, although it's obviously an earlier version of it."

Grayskull pointed to the floor beneath them. "Do you mean to say that you know the way?"

"Better," Adam said with a smile. "I know a secret way. It was closed off in our time, we once tried to use it to infiltrate the mountain, but our enemy Skeletor had already sealed it. In this time, however, it should be brand new and functioning."

"Excellent," Grayskull said. "Lead the way, then."

His grin still in place, Adam led them down the hall to a statue of King Hiss holding a wicked looking snake staff, as dissimilar to the Staff of Ka as a Snake Man was to a human. The staff in the sculpture was simple, with a circular ball at its apex, however a large serpent circled the staff, its head at the top. "This statue was mostly destroyed in our time, probably by Skeletor, but," he paused, feeling around the surface of the statue with his hands, looking for seams while his sister and Grayskull kept an eye out for more guards. Seeing a fine vertical line on the statue's right shoulder, Adam pulled down gently on the hand that held the staff and felt a slight click. A moment later, the wall panel behind the statue slid to the left, opening a hidden passageway. "Got it," he said.

"Excellent work, my friend!" Grayskull exclaimed quietly, as they were still trying to be as silent as possible. Adora gave Adam a quick embrace and the three of them entered the tunnel. With a click of a button on the other side of the wall, the hidden panel slid closed behind them, bathing them in darkness.

7.

THE PRIESTESS

Adora, Adam and Grayskull made their way through the hidden tunnel slowly. The passage was incredibly narrow and forced them to walk single-file. With a flick of her wrist, Adora used the cape of her new Starburst armor to shine a light on the path ahead, taking point in this unexpected part of their journey. The three of them couldn't believe their luck in finding this secret tunnel as it would allow them, hopefully, to avoid any more close calls with the Snake Men that called the Temple of Serpos home. Having had to enter the temple at its apex, they knew that they now needed to descend to the very bottom to find the Font of Life, which Adam hoped would restore his connection to the power Zoar had gifted his bloodline. Adora could become She-Ra at will with the Sword of Protection, but she was stranded here in the past without it and hoped that the font would also benefit her. The tunnel they were in formed a winding, circular pattern, bringing them lower and lower, the pitch of its descent almost enough to make them lose their footing. Every hundred paces or so, the three companions would reach a sharp turn and make their way in the opposite direction until they came upon the next turn. "Do you have any idea what the font will look like when we reach it?" Adora asked Grayskull.

"It's hard to say. I know what it looked like nearly a decade ago, but this entire temple has been built over it since then."

"Do you think Hiss knows about its power?" Adam asked.

"It has long been foretold to have mystical properties. It would be no surprise to me if Hiss knew of it," Grayskull answered. "In fact, I would say that this temple is proof of that knowledge."

"Do you think he would seal it off to prevent anyone else from using it?" Adam asked.

"Aye, but knowing Hiss, he would have first made every effort to use it himself and he has not yet been able to do so."

"How do you know?" Adora asked.

"If Hiss had the power, he would have expanded his empire over all of Tellus by now," he said. "No, I don't think he's been able use the font, and his building this tribute to Serpos above it likely doubles as an effort to keep it secret."

"To help keep himself in power," Adam said. "The last thing he'd want is for yet another human to gain Zoar's strength and become a threat to him."

Grayskull nodded solemnly before stopping. "I have not wanted to say it aloud, friends, for I know that this is your mission, but I fear that the font will only work when Zoar herself is there to bless it, as she was with me. If we do not see her, I'm afraid that your journey here, with all its dangers, will have been for nothing."

Adam clapped his ancestor's shoulder comfortingly. "I have faith that Zoar wouldn't send us here if she didn't plan on being there somehow, D'Vann."

"I know," he replied, "and I apologize for doubting, but it has been many years since I've seen her in any form."

"That you know of," Adora said.

"What do you mean?" Grayskull asked.

"I have a feeling that Zoar has been watching over you more than you might think," she said with a smile.

"Then she must surely be ashamed, having given her gift to a man as lost as myself," Grayskull replied solemnly.

"I don't think she does anything with regret," Adora said. "Besides, maybe that's why she sent us. You are her champion, after all."

An undefinable look came over the future king's face at her words. He had no idea of his role in Zoar's plans, but he would learn soon enough. "So I am," he said quietly.

The three of them walked in silence after that until it came time for Adora to tell them that they'd arrived at the end of the tunnel. "We're here," she said, her hand placed upon the cold stone wall in front of her. The tunnel came to an abrupt stop there, leading to what appeared to be a blank wall with no opening. With a little searching, Adora found a button disguised as a stone on the left wall. Pressing it, a hidden panel slid open to reveal a room lit by torchlight. Chained to the far wall was a lone female figure. Barefoot and dressed in rags, the woman's face was hidden by a burlap sack that had been placed over her head. "Well, that's not what I expected," Adora whispered. The three of them pushed carefully into the room, glancing around in all directions for any sign of Hiss's guards. The room was sparse, holding only the prisoner. The wall to their right had a metal door in its center, most likely leading to the rest of the temple.

The panel at their rear slid closed and the three of them found themselves alone with the unidentified woman, whose covered head lifted at the sound of Adora's voice and the closing panel. "Is someone there?" the prisoner asked, her voice soft and quiet.

"We are here, friend," Grayskull said, stepping forward to gently remove the woman's hood, revealing her shaved head and sparkling blue eyes. There was a depth to them that was undeniable even in the poor lighting of the room, as if they held the universe within them. It was a long moment before she and Grayskull broke eye contact. "We must free her," Grayskull said, turning to Adam and Adora.

"What about what you said before?" Adam asked. He looked to his sister and he knew that she recognized the woman instantly, much as he had. It was Zoar, clothed in the same humanoid form named Veena that they'd first met her in, with two notable exceptions: her youth, and the fact that her wings were missing. Here, Veena appeared wholly human. Adam was only asking the question because he didn't want to let on to Grayskull that they knew her.

"If she's hidden this deep in Hiss's lair, and more importantly chained, she surely is prized to him, but not as a supporter. I cannot bring myself to leave her here, despite my earlier words."

"I agree, of course," Adam replied, stepping forward to help Grayskull free her. Adam held her up, his arms around her waist as Grayskull used his tremendous strength to shatter her shackles, careful not to harm her while he did so.

"I told you we'd meet again," Veena whispered into Adam's ear, where he alone could hear. Once she was free, she spoke once more, but this time loud enough for all three of them to hear her. "Thank you."

"Would you do me the honor of telling me your name?" Grayskull asked.

"I am Veena," she replied. "The last remaining High Priestess of Zoar."

Grayskull's expression lit up brightly. "Providence, my friends!" he exclaimed as he faced them. "Another warrior of Zoar sent to our aid!"

Veena laughed quietly. "It would seem that it is you three who were sent to mine. May I have your names?"

Adam and Adora knew of course that they could not tell D'Vann the truth of Veena's identity. Whether the man would ever learn that truth was not something that either of them could say, it certainly wasn't in the history books, nor was it mentioned in the legends that Adam had heard as a child. "I am He-Man," Adam replied before indicating his companions, "and this is my sister She-Ra, and our friend and guide, D'Vann Grayskull."

"How long have you been imprisoned here?" Adora asked. It was the question Adam had been thinking, but was afraid to bring up. Did she just appear here in this form, moments before the three of them entered, or had she actually been imprisoned here in her human form, unable to escape?

Veena seemed unfazed by the inquiry. "As a Zoar Priestess, I am sadly considered a prized possession by Hiss. I do not know how long I have been here, though it feels like ages. Let us simply say that I have been here more than long enough."

"Fair enough," Adora said with a nod. "Now you're free to come with us."

"Where are you headed?" Veena asked.

"We are here searching for the Font of Life," Grayskull replied. Years ago, Zoar gifted her power to me through it, and now she sends these two to find it and partake of its power as I once did. However, I am afraid that this abomination of a temple was not here when I was last and, other than descending to its lowest level, I am unsure of how to find it."

"Why do you call this temple an abomination?" Veena asked.

A perplexed look came over the man's face, obviously blindsided by the question. "Why? Because Serpos is a god of evil, enslaving humans for his own ends." He said it as if it were obvious.

Veena brushed off his answer with a wave of her hand. "No gods are evil, just as none are good. They just are. It isn't our place to define them. If evil is being done in these lands in the name of Serpos, it is the evil of Hiss and his followers and theirs alone. Do you really think that Zoar would align herself with slavery and corruption? If she wouldn't, why then would Serpos?"

"Align herself? I-I don't know what to say," Grayskull stammered.

"Zoar has chosen all of you; I can see her in your auras; but each one of you has much to learn about the ways of gods." Veena closed her eyes as she spoke, seemingly lost in memory. "Zoar governs life, Serpos time, and Havok change. It is their combined wills that make the universe. In the beginning, Zoar sat in the heavens alongside her siblings, equal in all ways. For eons they were united, each doing their part to maintain what they had made. That is the way of things. It was the gods' respective followers who separated them over time, and in doing so, disrupted the balance of the universe. In truth, they long to be together. They continue their work, but they do it alone and that is no way to live, even for a god." She turned to Grayskull and smiled as she took his hands in her own. "Trust in this, D'Vann Grayskull, one day they will sit side by side once more, and there will finally be peace."

"Peace? Do you not feel anger at being imprisoned here in the name of Serpos?" the man asked.

"Of course," Veena replied, "but that anger lies with Hiss, not the master he merely thinks he serves."

Grayskull didn't know what to make of this woman, that much Adam and Adora could both tell, but he seemed captivated by her nonetheless. "I'm sorry," Adora said, interrupting them, "this is all very fascinating, but do you know where the font is?"

"Yes," Veena replied, letting go of Grayskull's hands and rubbing her wrists, still sore from her shackles. "I can feel its power even from here. In repayment for releasing me from my bonds, I will take you to it."

Grayskull, thinking of the armaments his new friends carried, and feeling the weight of his own battle axe upon his back, felt concern for this mysterious woman's

safety in a way that he did not understand. He barely knew her, yet he felt as if she'd been by his side for years. "Do you require a weapon?" he asked.

Veena simply shook her head as she approached the cell door. "My mother will provide one."

"Your mother?" Grayskull asked.

"Zoar is the mother of us all," Veena replied.

Grayskull nodded and with a shove of his shoulder, broke the door loose from its hinges. "Then lead the way, Priestess, and we will follow. By Zoar, no further harm will come to you in this place, I swear it."

"See?" Veena said. "Already, she is protecting me." Motioning to their left, she began to walk. "This way." She moved with a grace that Grayskull found captivating. "I can feel the font below us still," she said. "We must try to find a stairwell of some kind." They made their way down the wide hallway, but were soon cut off by two guards who were marching down a hallway perpendicular to their own.

The two Snake Men immediately took notice of the curious quartet and readied their weapons; the guard on the left brandishing a spear; the one on the right drawing a sword. "Halt!" the left guard shouted. Before Grayskull and his companions could attack, Veena calmly walked toward the Snake Men, who rushed at her, weapons at the ready. They came upon her quickly, each thrusting their tools of death in her direction, but she crouched low in an instantaneous, fluid movement, causing both guards to inflict fatal wounds only on each other, just above her head. The guards fell in a heap. Standing upright and turning back to her new friends, they each stared at her, slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

"How?" Grayskull asked. "How did you know that they would miss?"

"I didn't," Veena answered simply.

Without further word, the four of them quickly hid the bodies of the two Snake Men in a small storage room. Thankfully, most of the blood had been absorbed by the Snake Men's tunics and they'd left little behind on the floor. Adam was able to wipe it away with a clean piece of one of the guard's tunic which he'd torn off. When they'd finished, Veena turned and once again began walking down the hallway. "Come, there is still some ways to go."

Approaching the intersecting hallway from which the Snake Men had appeared, Veena stopped momentarily, looking in both directions. After a slight

pause, she turned and headed to the right. The three warriors followed close behind. At the end of the hall, they came upon a spiral stairwell that they hoped would lead them the rest of the way down. Veena lead them as they descended. The stairwell made for tight quarters, forcing them to make their way single-file. It wasn't long before they met more opposition. A largely-muscled Snake Man hissed in surprise as it nearly ran into Veena on its way up the stairs. Drawing its sword, the creature plunged the blade toward her. She dodged the majority of the blow gracefully, but the opposing blade connected with the soft flesh of her upper arm, causing bright red blood to flow upon piercing her. Veena stumbled backward, running into Grayskull almost immediately and falling backward as she lost her footing.

Without missing a beat, Grayskull kicked the Snake Man square in the face, causing the Snake Man to tumble down the steps in a series of backward somersaults. Leaping over Veena, Grayskull brought his battle axe crashing down on their foe and finished the battle swiftly. The man quickly turned back to Veena. "Are you alright?" he asked with great concern.

Seemingly fascinated by the blood pouring from her wound, Veena merely stared at it as it ran in rivulets down her arm. "I-I bleed," she stammered.

"We all bleed," Grayskull said, bewildered by her shocked state.

"I've never bled before," she said. "Such pain."

"Hiss did not torture you?" Grayskull asked.

Snapping back to the world around her, Veena looked at the man before her and shook her head. "Not as such, no."

Adam and Adora were more acutely aware of the situation than Grayskull could ever be. Zoar, in human form as Veena, had just felt pain for the first time. There's no knowing what she thought of it, but she'd nearly exposed her secret to Grayskull and she knew it. Neither of the twins knew the exact reason why Veena had chosen to keep the truth of her identity secret from him, but Adora surmised that she was afraid to scare him off. Veena was destined to one day become Grayskull's bride, however D'Vann respected and revered Zoar too much to view her as a woman he could have and love, and who could love him in return. The Eternian princess understood in her own way that Veena must be hiding her truth in order to protect herself from rejection. Perhaps she was more human than even she knew. Still, the fact remained that they would have to patch her up and continue on. "Here," Adora interjected, "let me help." Sliding past her brother in the narrow stairwell, she helped Veena to her feet before ripping off a section of the woman's

ragged garment. She then tied it tightly to Veena's upper arm. "This will help stop the bleeding, but when we get out of here, I'll have to take a better look at it. I may have to stitch it up for you."

Veena looked at her with eyes that, for the first time, betrayed a naivety that surprised Adora. "Thank you," she said, and Adora knew that the woman meant it.

"Any time," she replied. Leaning in close, she whispered, "I may not know a lot about the gods, but you have a lot to learn about what it's like to be human. You need to be careful." Leaning back, she smiled warmly at a woman who she realized was, in many ways, as much of a stranger to human existence as a child was. Perhaps that's why she made the choice to take this form, Adora mused. Maybe, with the knowledge of what it was to be human, she thought that she would be a better goddess to them.

"Yes," Veena replied quietly. "I will. Thank you once more."

"Don't thank me," Adora said, still smiling in an effort to not offend the woman who she knew was also much more. "Just be careful."

"So, you are alright?" Grayskull persisted.

"Yes, my friend," Veena nodded. "I am now."

"Good," he replied warmly. "Do you think we're almost there?" he asked. "These tight quarters make any enemy engagement difficult."

"Nearly," she said. "I can feel it."

"We must hide this body as we did the others. When we are finished, I will lead the way from here," Grayskull said, "if you don't mind," he added belatedly.

"Of course," she said. "Thank you."

"Zoar helps us," Grayskull said, "but she best helps those who help themselves."

Adora and Adam watched as Veena tilted her head slightly, not quite understanding what Grayskull meant. After a moment, she nodded in agreement. She'd likely never been confronted first hand with how many humans viewed her; as disconnected and unconcerned; and one look in her eyes told them that that realization was something she would be thinking long and hard about.

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Elsewhere in the temple, Rattlor, general of Hiss's army, roamed the halls. Stopping suddenly, he flicked his forked tongue, tasting the air. His slitted eyes narrowed as he caught the taste of blood. Human blood was not uncommon in the temple, far from it, but he sensed something different about this scent. It didn't smell human. Kneeling down, Rattlor traced his clawed hand along the tiled floor, but he found nothing. Frustrated, he stood with a disappointed grunt. About to chalk up the scent to too much drink gone to his head, he smiled as he caught sight of a bright red drop on the right wall, trailing down only an inch or so. It sat upon the dark mortar between tiles, previously undiscovered by whomever had helped it find its way there. Someone had tried to clean up something that had happened here, but they hadn't done so thoroughly. Obviously, they were in a hurry. Leaning in toward the blood on the wall, he flicked the speck with his tongue and knew in an instant that it belonged to a Snake Man. Their taste was unique. Anger rose up within him. Perhaps one of the slaves had revolted. Using his tongue to flick the air once more, he followed the taste of the blood in the air to what was essentially a supply closet. Opening it, he found not one, but two corpses inside. He knew these serpents. They weren't the cream of the crop, but they were skilled. No mere slave had done this, at least not alone. Somehow, despite the difficulty of entering this temple by a non-snake, they had intruders. If only King Hiss were here. He enjoyed this kind of thing, the slaughtering of enemies. Rattlor made a mental note to have a victory drink for his king later that night, once he'd personally taken care of their unwelcome visitors.

Smelling the air once more, he caught something else: the scent of humans. It wasn't the scent he'd normally associated with mankind, as those he'd encountered had always reeked of fear. No, this scent was different. A hint of sweat, perhaps due to nervousness, but not fear. Following it to a stairwell, he made his way down until he once again tasted blood. Another of his guards killed? He would have to have a talk with those that remained. It was unacceptable to lose three men in a single day. They'd gotten lazy and deserved punishment. Finding this third body with relative ease, this time hidden behind a statue, he felt his muscles tense. They were close. He was sure of it. Listening for voices, he heard none, but clenched his fists in readiness nonetheless. Whatever the reason for this invasion, it would soon be over. It was then that the general remembered the prized prisoner King Hiss had hidden down here in the depths of the temple and quickened his pace, using his wrist-communicator to call for reinforcements.

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It wasn't much longer before the group reached the bottom of the stairwell. Thankfully, they'd had no further incidents and found themselves in a large hallway that, according to Veena, was leading them to the font. Far from the more intricately decorated upper levels, this hallway, located deep within the temple, was dark and damp; water from the moist jungle seeping into the concrete walls. At least it wasn't so narrow. "We are nearly there," Veena said from behind Grayskull as she directed him toward a door at the far end of the hall. Much like the hallway, the door itself bore little resemblance to the decor of the upper floors, serving a functional purpose only, as opposed to being decorative as well. The door was essentially a thick metal slab on hinges, with a large bolt and lock holding it closed and locked.

Grayskull hefted his large axe and brought it down with all his force, but the lock merely deflected the blow and vibrated with a strange resonating power. "The lock appears to be enchanted," the man said, visibly trying to hide his disappointment. "Even this unbreakable weapon made not a mark upon it."

Adora removed her staff, pressing a button hidden near the head of it that expanded it to its full length. Motioning for the others to make room, she swung the staff with a flourish, bringing it down hard upon the lock, but again, it merely hummed after deflecting her blow. She glanced at her companions and shrugged. "If even Grayskull can't break it, I suppose it was silly of me to think that I could do it."

"You hold much power within you," Veena said. "But perhaps He-Man's weapon is more suited to this purpose?"

Adam pulled the beautiful Star Sword from the sheath on his back and nodded. "It's worth a try."

"Each of your weapons are gifted with strong magics," Veena replied, "but the Star Sword is the most powerful by far."

"You know of it?" Grayskull asked.

"Yes," Veena relied. "Brought to this world by the wizard Ro, it is said to hold the power of the stars themselves."

"Did you know him" Adam asked.

"In my own way," she replied vaguely. "He was a good, kind man."

Adam made a mental note that he would have to inquire further if he got the opportunity. Holding the glimmering sword aloft, Adam felt its power course through

him, similar to how the Sword of Light used to, years ago. Bringing the weapon down upon the lock, the impact of the two objects colliding emitted a bright flash. When the flash had faded, the lock lay upon the floor, cleaved in two.

"Good," Veena said. "Now let us enter." She motioned to Grayskull who used his great strength to push the metal slab open into a dark room.

Adora used her Starburst armor's cape to illuminate the room for them, revealing brick floors and walls. At the center of it all, surrounded by a circular pattern of blocks that made it resemble a well, was what Adora assumed was the font. "Is this it?" she asked.

"Yes," Veena said. "What Hiss has left of it."

Saddened by the sight, Grayskull spoke softly, "It has been robbed of its beauty."

"Yes, but not its power," Veena replied. She turned to the twins. "Now drink quickly, for I sense others approaching."

"How will it work without the presence of Zoar?" Grayskull asked. "Surely it was only with her blessing that it worked for me, and her absence must be why it has never worked for Hiss or his followers."

"Her blessing is with us, my friend, in me," Veena answered. "It is no accident that you found a priestess of Zoar here, and that you freed me to come and join you. She has obviously willed this."

Adam and Adora knew this to be true and each of them knelt on the hard brick floor, dipping their hands into the water, which they found to be surprisingly warm to the touch. The twins looked at each other as they brought the water to their lips and drank, feeling the power Veena spoke of flow through them almost as soon as it touched their lips. For Adora, it was not too different from her transformations into She-Ra, but for Adam, it was a feeling he'd not experienced in years. The king didn't realize just how much he'd missed it until he felt it once more, coursing through him, filling him with the power of Grayskull or, should he say, the same power that he shared with Grayskull: the power of Zoar. Both twins' muscles swelled and grew. Adam felt a sense of vitality that he'd not had since his younger days. The two of them stood in the near-dark and Grayskull smiled as he saw their transformation.

"It worked," Grayskull said.

"Of course," Veena replied with a grin. "With the power flowing through them once more, they are ready for what awaits them. Now, we must leave so that they may complete their mission."

"Have they not? I thought that this was their mission?" Grayskull replied.

"Only the first step," the priestess said, turning back to the door. "Come, we must leave quickly." Stepping out into the hallway, she stopped suddenly. When her companions joined her, they saw why: dozens of Snake Men were rushing into the hallway, awaiting them. "My apologies," she said quietly. "They are already here."

"I see you've been blessed by the font," General Rattlor said with a hiss. "It mattersss not, for now you will die." At his command, the legion of Snake Men drew their weapons and attacked.

Veena ducked behind her companions as they each drew their weapons. Grayskull was the first to rush headlong into their adversaries' ranks, swinging his axe wildly with his left hand as he blocked their weapons and teeth with his armored right arm. Adora followed suit and cut a wide swath through the Snake Men with the Staff of Ka. Having trained with many different weapons in her time as Despara, including staffs and double-ended weapons, she swung the staff with expert precision.

Adam was likewise in his element, swinging his new Star Sword with all the finesse and power he'd once displayed with the Sword of Light. Each blow struck with the shimmering weapon created a flash of light and sent as many as three Snake Men flying back into their comrades. The soldiers that Adam didn't strike with his weapon were struck instead with his powerful fist, which was more than enough on its own now that he had the power within himself once more. Suddenly, Adam found himself being smashed in the right side by the powerful tail of Rattlor, the blow sending him careening into the wall of the cramped hallway. The general followed, his large tail swinging towards Adam once more before being stopped suddenly by Grayskull's pincer, shot out from the man's armored right arm. With a rumbling growl, Rattlor knocked the pincer aside and turned to face his new attacker, but screamed in pain as Grayskull used his axe to sever the general's left arm at the elbow. Grayskull knew from experience that the arm would likely grow back over time; Snake Men tended to regenerate lost limbs; but it didn't stop Rattlor from feeling pain, the intensity of which sent the general into a rage. Lashing out in his anger, Rattlor's tail smashed into his own men standing near him, while Adam and his allies avoided it.

"We'll never make it back to the top of the tower now that they know we're here!" Adora shouted. "We need to find a different way out!"

"Agreed!" Adam replied over the furor that now surrounded them. "Grayskull, get Veena!" he shouted. When a Snake Man struck at him, Adam knocked his foe's attacking arm down before quickly stepping up onto the creature's shoulder and launching himself upward, using all his might to strike the ceiling with his fist, using his newly acquired power to create a hole large enough for them to escape through. Landing back down on the stone floor, he kicked away the Snake Man whom he'd used as a lift and swung the mighty Star Sword in a circle around him, causing the remaining enemies around them to scatter, if only briefly. As soon as he had enough room, he dropped his sword to the floor and knelt down low.

Realizing what her brother was up to, Adora ran toward him and stepped into his cupped hands which he used to launch her upward through the opening he'd just made above them. Grayskull shouldered through the throng of soldiers toward Adam soon after, Veena held close to his side. While Grayskull brandished his axe, Adam launched Veena upward, where Adora deftly caught her and pulled her to safety. Grayskull nodded his thanks as the same was done for him. Looking upward at his companions, who now gazed down at him from the floor above, Adam readied himself to jump before being violently knocked aside by Rattlor, landing on his back. The general hissed at him, tongue flicking the air, as the blood from his severed arm ran steadily out and onto the floor. The Snake Man charged and Adam realized that the blood loss had obviously begun to affect him, as Rattlor stumbled slightly in his approach. With a grunt, Adam kicked with both feet from his prone position, connecting with the charging general's thick midsection, the blow sending his foe crashing into the wall with such force that he broke through it and into the soft earth on the other side. The general emerged slowly, managing two steps toward Adam before lowering to one knee and finally collapsing in a heap. The remaining Snake Men fled at the sight of their leader being defeated and Adam took advantage of the opportunity to regain his footing and make the leap upward to join his friends.

"Are you alright, brother?" Adora asked him as she caught hold of his arm and pulled him to safety.

"He just caught me off guard. I'll be fine," he answered, breathing slightly heavy despite himself, "but thanks."

"How are we going to get out?" Grayskull asked. "She-Ra is right, with the guards alerted, we'll never make it to the top, at least not with Veena in one piece."

“Actually,” Adam began, “That monster’s defeat gave me an idea. We should be above ground now.” With that, he turned and ran toward the wall of the hallway they found themselves in and punched it with all his strength, shattering it outward, the bricks flying out and striking the wall that surrounded the temple. The four of them ran into the morning daylight outside and Grayskull quickly leapt to the top of the wall. Adam assisted Veena as he had inside, and Grayskull caught her gracefully before taking her over the wall to the jungle on the other side. Once Adam and Adora saw that their friends were safely over, they followed suit and the four of them escaped into the dense jungle in search of the cave system that had brought them there.

8.

THE NEXT STEPS

After a day of trudging through the Mountains of Gnarl, the quartet had nearly reached the other side. The previous morning, the sounds of the Snake Men pressing through the dense jungle in pursuit had forced them to move as fast as they could manage. Thankfully, they had made their way back to the entrance of the cave they'd used to infiltrate Hiss's territory with no further incident, Adora's light-bending armor helping them remain hidden on more than one occasion. However, not long after exiting the Cave of Power, they had found an army of Hiss's soldiers waiting for them, blocking their return path to Zalesia. They'd remained unseen by the Snake Men, but it had been obvious that their planned return trip to Zalesia would have been impossible. They could only guess as to whether the Snake Men suspected Nikolas of helping them, but they likely did. Grayskull fully expected Rattlor, or perhaps even King Hiss himself, to pay the Zalesian leader a visit very soon. D'Vann did not want to put his friend in any further danger and had made the decision to traverse the mountains in the opposite direction instead, claiming he knew the way to a city called Talok on the other side.

Adam and Adora had once again joined Grayskull in being blessed with great power from Zoar and the journey was none too difficult for the three of them.

Veena's human form had its limits, however. She was exhausted by the endeavor, requiring the occasional rest, such as the one they took now, near the crest of the final mountain. A small stream passed through the mountains here, but large enough to support some rather succulent fish, which Grayskull had caught and cooked. Veena closed her eyes and thanked the fish for sustaining her before eating. The other three followed suit. Grayskull wiped his mouth after a rather large bite before looking toward Veena. "I'm not sure why the thought didn't occur to me before," he began, "but why did you not drink of the font, Priestess? Surely Zoar would have blessed you, as she did us."

"She has already blessed me," Veena replied between bites. "First, she has given me life, and now she has given me freedom and new friends. There is no more that I require of her."

"But surely the strength would benefit you," he reasoned.

"Not as much as you," she said. She smiled vaguely before looking down at her bare feet, which were scraped and bloody from the journey. "That being said, I apologize for slowing you down. My body is weary, and I've not eaten a real meal in longer than I can remember. For that and my freedom, I thank you."

"Forgive me," Grayskull said, embarrassed. "I meant no offense. You are no burden to us, Veena. Quite the opposite. I enjoy your company." As he said this, he looked away somewhat sheepishly, which both Adam and Adora shared a smile over. It was quite the dichotomy seeing the mountainous warrior nervous around this woman he'd obviously taken a liking to, even in the brief time they'd known each other. If he only knew the truth of who she really was. Putting out the fire, D'Vann began to gather their things. They needed to keep moving.

Leaving the group, Veena stood and walked to the nearby crest of the mountain, looking out over the lands stretched out below them. Talok City could be seen in the distance. It was an ancient city and one of the few from before the Great Wars that still stood. Little was known of the world before the Great Wars; its secrets now lost to time. Unlike her new friends, however, Veena remembered. Adam and Adora approached her and she greeted them with a nod.

"You look to be deep in thought," Adam said. "I hope we're not interrupting."

"I was, and no, of course not. I welcome your presence." She indicated the horizon ahead of them and sighed. "Looking out over this landscape, it reminds me that change is natural and inevitable, but change has always been my brother Havok's purview, not my own. In some ways, it saddens me that so much history and life has been lost to the passage of time."

"What do you mean?" Adora asked.

"You know of the Great Wars, at least by name, but you don't know what came before. None of you do. Even in this time period, there is little record of it save for the technological artifacts left behind." She paused, sitting down on the grass, facing out toward the horizon, before being joined by the twins, who did likewise. "In the time before the Great Wars," Veena began, "Tellus was once called Eternia, which should sound familiar to you. It had been a great and thriving planet, full of wondrous creations and mechanical achievements far more advanced than even what you two know from your time." With Grayskull out of earshot, she'd obviously forgone the pretense of being merely Veena. She was now speaking to them as Zoar, the Goddess of life. "For eons it was this way, before the Age of Havok."

"The Age of Havok?" Adam asked. "I thought we were in the First Age now? This 'Age of Serpos'?"

Veena shook her head. "There have been more ages to this world than your history books can tell you. More than your scientists, despite all their vast knowledge, would ever believe. This is merely the first age of your recorded history, and even as much as you know, there is so much that you do not. More of this world has faded to dust than you could ever study or discover. The name 'Eternia' was no accident. It has been here since the beginning of all things." Turning to face them, she continued. "My siblings and I ascend in cycles. There is a harmony to this; a balance. One of us being in ascendance does not mean we are dominant, for the gods must work together always, even without the direct contact that we once shared. The cycles always proceed thusly: my age ends, giving way to Havok's, just as his gave way to Serpos's. Soon, this age will also end."

"Giving way to another Age of Zoar," Adora said. "The age my brother and I know."

"Yes."

"That's why we're really here, isn't it?" Adam asked. "To help Grayskull usher in the next age."

"Not fully," she admitted, "for it will come regardless, but you will help him take his first steps toward his true destiny."

"What do you mean?" Adora asked.

"You will help him become the king that he is destined to be," Veena replied.

"That could take quite some time," Adam said. "Our world, in our time, is in danger. Our families are in danger."

"Do not fear, Adam. Your family and friends will remain safe. As I've promised, you will return in time to help them, but for now your help is needed here. It will not take as much time as you think," Veena said. "The world is ready for a hero, ready to see Hiss defeated. Others have tried and failed. It is D'Vann's destiny to do this."

"And I want to help him," Adam said, "I just worry for my wife and son. But if you say that they will be protected, then I believe you."

"Keldor has things well in hand in the future," Veena said. "He hates Hordak as much as you love your family. He will not allow Hordak to win."

"Forgive me if I still have trouble trusting him," Adam replied.

"I understand," she said. "If not him, then trust in me."

"Why have you taken your current form?" Adora asked, never afraid to ask important questions, even if she did so a little brusquely at times. "Are you human or just disguised as a human? What purpose does Veena serve?"

"When I am in this form, I assure you that I am as human anyone else," Veena replied, "at least physically." She paused, running her hand along her bandaged arm, which Adora had tended to their first night in the mountains. "I'm not quite accustomed to it, however; being in such a fragile body."

"Then why become human at all?" Adora asked.

"To better understand you," Veena said, looking up one more. "And to better understand love and fear and sadness and all of the things that make you who and what you are. Humanity is beautiful to me; a fragile, fleeting existence, not unlike how I'd imagine a human would view a flower. But while I can and have admired humanity's beauty from afar, I've never truly understood it. How can I be a proper goddess of life without having experienced life myself? How can I help provide you with what you need if I don't understand your point of view?"

"You'll be in good company. Many of us don't understand it, either," Adam admitted.

"Which is the very reason you are so quick to destroy one another," Veena said.

"I suppose you're right about that," he said.

"But how can you know about what's happening in the future if you traveled back in time with us?" Adora asked.

"I didn't travel with you," she replied. "The Veena you met at Castle Grayskull is still there, a thousand years hence. Here, I am the same Veena that has always been in this time."

"Then how can you know what's happening there? Who we are?" Adora pressed on.

"It's not something I can easily explain other than to say that I do not view time the same way that you do."

"She's the goddess," Adam said simply. "We're not meant to understand."

"That sounds like a cop-out," Adora replied.

"Perhaps if you ever meet Serpos, it will be made clearer," Veena replied.

"But if you need our help to make Grayskull king, how did he become king in the first place?" Adora continued. "In our past? I just don't understand how our being here isn't messing up history."

"Because your being here is history. Time cannot be changed," Veena said. "All is happening as it has always happened."

"You mean we were always destined to do this? To be here in this time?" Adam asked.

"Yes."

"But how?" he replied. "He-Man and She-Ra should have been legends in our time if that were true. There's no record of us helping Grayskull in the history books, or even of anyone like us under different names."

"And that means that it didn't happen?" Veena asked with a smile. "As I've told you, history as it is taught is seldom history as it truly was. And much has been lost to the cycle of time."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Adam acquiesced.

"Why do you not tell Grayskull who you are?" Adora asked. The question had been foremost on Adam's mind as well, but he hadn't been willing to ask.

"Now is not the appropriate time," Veena said.

"Time for what?" Grayskull asked, walking up behind them. He carried their supplies slung over his back.

"To set up camp," Veena replied. "He-Man was concerned for me and thought that perhaps we should stop, but I have assured him that I can continue. Thank you, however, for your kindness," she said, nodding to Adam as the three of them stood upright once more.

"Of course," Adam said. "I just wanted to make sure that you were alright."

"Zoar will give me the strength to continue," she said. "We can see Talok City from here. We can stay there tonight, as long as we make haste."

"Regardless, you have to let me know if you need anything," Grayskull said. "I'm afraid I must insist."

"Of course," Veena replied with a smile. "You have already provided so much. The meal that you prepared us has returned much of my strength. I thank you."

"Anything for the last priestess of Zoar," Grayskull said. "Whatever the goddess needs from me, whatever you need from me, I will give freely."

"For now," she said, "perhaps just a hand down this mountain?"

Grayskull smiled as he extended his arm for support. Veena took it and pulled herself close to him as they began to descend from the peak, Adam and Adora following closely behind.

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The four of them entered Talok City just before nightfall. Adam and his sister listened closely as Grayskull spoke of the city. Talok itself was small compared to most of the cities and kingdoms of Adam and Adora's time, but it more than made up for its size with its history. Dating from before the Great Wars, the actual founding of the city and the circumstances surrounding it were long-forgotten, even in this time. No one knew who had originally built it, or who its initial inhabitants had been. In Adam and Adora's time, the city was gone, but there had been many tales told of the lost city of Talok. It was a legend in its own way, inspiring many stories. Unfortunately, the city's end was just as much of a mystery as its beginning, and since that end hadn't yet happened in this time, it was not something that

Grayskull would be able to tell them, either. All Adam knew of Talok was that it was very old and housed wonders that one rarely saw in this age, holdovers from the time that came before.

And yet, despite its mystery, here they were, walking the dusty streets of a living, breathing city, home to a multitude of races and species. Although Talok lacked the grandeur of Zalesia, it was beautiful in its own way; its sandstone architecture seemingly out of place in a location that was no longer a desert, but rather surrounded by green forests. While Adam knew that it would one day be gone, he appreciated the miracle that allowed him to be there, and he studied his surroundings intensely, taking in every detail. He would have to tell his father about all of it. The entire experience of being a thousand years in the past was something that he would have a tough time describing to Randor or anyone else once they'd returned, and being in the lost city of Talok before its disappearance had now made that task even more difficult. He was standing within a myth.

One thing that Talok had in common with Zalesia, Adam noticed, was its freedom. It was one of the last remaining cities in the known world not ruled by King Hiss. Instead, Talok housed the Council of Elders that Nikolas Powers had spoken of days before. Adam knew from his studies that the Council would one day act as Grayskull's advisors once he had become king, but for now their role was unknown to him. As the four of them walked through the city, the sky became darker with the setting sun. Grayskull assured them that they were nearing the inn where they would spend the night, pointing out a medium sized building not far ahead. Approaching the inn's door, D'Vann walked inside and spoke with the innkeeper long enough to procure a room for them. After their travels, their weary bodies welcomed sleep quickly.

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Rattlor shifted his neck at an awkward angle, the subtle crack relieving some of the pressure that he'd felt there since the battle with Grayskull and whoever those other warriors were that the cur had with him days earlier. He continued walking forward, though with measured paces, for he was in no hurry to reach his destination. Grayskull had long been a thorn in his master Hiss's side, though the human hadn't been a problem of any real significance for several years. Though he'd never heard that Grayskull was dead, Rattlor had assumed that the wanderer had retired, so to speak, from his efforts to disrupt the rule of the Snake Men in a part of some mad quest for his forgotten goddess. Obviously, Rattlor had been

wrong, and he'd paid the price for it. The general of Hiss's army looked down at the stump where his left arm had been severed by Grayskull's axe. It was wrapped tightly with bandages, some of which he'd bled through once more, despite several re-dressings. He knew that the arm would grow back in time, but the wound hurt like the fangs of Serpos himself. More than that, the loss had humiliated him. His men would never say such things to his face, but he knew that they had lost respect for him, despite their own losses. He was their leader. He was above them. He couldn't afford to be seen as weak. If his men viewed him in that manner, then he was at risk of being challenged for his position. The Snake Men's higher ranks were often granted through combat. Grayskull may not have killed Rattlor personally with this injury, but he'd figuratively painted a target on the general's back. He would have to be cautious in ways he hadn't been concerned about for years. This fact infuriated him. He swore that he would have his revenge on Grayskull, and he hoped to achieve it sooner rather than later. No longer just a goddess-mad barbarian, the man was now a legitimate threat.

What made it all worse was the fact that at least two of Grayskull's companions had now also been blessed by Zoar's font. That meant that there were now two more beings as powerful as Grayskull to oppose them. Despite all of his master's efforts, Hiss had never been able to harness the power of the font for himself. Either the liquid was not compatible with serpent DNA or, perhaps worse, there was the possibility that the font really was blessed by Grayskull's ancient goddess and only gave the power to those she had chosen. If that were the case, then she had hand-picked these new champions as well, and the increasing numbers of her followers could only be a threat to Hiss. The serpentine king had hidden away the font as best as he could, even going so far as to build the Temple of Serpos right over it, and yet still Zoar's champions had found a way to it and gained tremendous power upon doing so. The feeling of change was on the wind and if there was anything that Rattlor and his species hated, it was change. They'd remained virtually the same as a race for countless generations. They were a glorious creation, static in their perfection. Humanity, in contrast, somehow always evolved, becoming stronger, more intelligent, and more of a threat over time. These new players only meant that more changes were bound to come, and soon.

The large serpent continued his walk through the hallways of Hiss's hidden stronghold, located deep within the Corridors of Lithos, a nearly impregnable maze on the edge of the King's territory. If one stood at the corridor's outskirts, they would be dangerously close to the Ocean of Fire, which was a literal description due to an age-old spell. Hiss's stronghold, however, was hidden within the center of the maze. It was a relatively short and squat building, no higher than the shrubbery that made up the maze's walls. Unless one knew how to get to the center of the

labyrinth, they would be hopelessly lost. The building was not large enough to act as a guidepost to any wandering creatures who should not be there.

The inside of the stronghold was plainly decorated, built for function rather than splendor. There was enough of that at the temple. Rattlor shuddered slightly as he got ever closer to his king's hidden throne room. Hiss had called upon him personally after the failed battle days before and Rattlor knew that he was not in for a pleasant chat with his king. Not only had he allowed the intruders to sip from the font, but he'd also managed to let them escape. Rattlor blamed Nikolas Powers, the ruler of Zalesia, for his current hardships. Indeed, Hiss himself strongly suspected that Powers had been supplying various rebel groups with weapons and armor over the years, but he had never been able to prove it. Powers was dangerous and Hiss knew it, going so far as to make sure that the man could have no offspring in a stipulation of their peace treaty. Perhaps it was an extreme measure, but Hiss didn't like to take chances.

Rattlor approached the double doors that led to the throne room and the two attending guards pushed them open, allowing him to pass through. The room was in almost complete darkness, lit only by candlelight. Hiss's throne rested near the center of the far wall. Walking up to his ruler, Rattlor knelt on one knee and bowed his head low. "You called for me, my king?"

Hiss was dressed in his human disguise, complete with full royal armor made up of the green scales of the dragons of Darksmoke, many of which were killed by Hiss during his more adventurous youth. The dim candlelight illuminated each hard line of the king's human-like face, making it seem as if he had been etched from granite; a statue of cold, calculating splendor. It was appropriate, for his expression was stone-like in its still, frozen anger. The king of the Snake Men sat forward slightly and narrowed his eyes at the general, his slitted pupils dilating to take in the sight of his humbled servant in the dark room. A master of disguise, Hiss bore the appearance of a man but, when in his true form, was the most gloriously horrifying Snake Man of all. "I am displeased with recent events, Rattlor. I should flay your body here in this very room and make your flesh into a flag, to fly as a warning to the others."

Rattlor shuddered. "I am yoursss, my king. You are free to do as you wish with me, but I beg you to ssspare me."

Hiss grimaced, disgusted by the sight of one of his most formidable warriors begging. "Humor me, then." He sat back on his throne and waved his hand in an indication to continue. "Tell me why I should spare you."

"I live only to serve you," Rattlor replied. "In repayment, I will make it my life's mission to destroy Grayskull and his allies."

"You should have done that already, without any threat from me," Hiss said. "How is your revenge repayment to me? The man wounded you, humiliated you. Such is a debt that can only be repaid in blood by you, and it should have already been done."

"Yes, my master, but Powers must have helped them. He—"

"Silence!" Hiss bellowed. He stood upright and kicked Rattlor harshly, violently driving the general to the ground. The king leaned over his subject, jabbing his index finger into Rattlor's face. "It is not Powers who defeated you and I don't care about your personal vengeance. You will destroy Grayskull and his friends, even if you die in the process, because it is my will. It sickens me to see you so weak and pathetic."

"Yes, master," was all Rattlor could manage.

Hiss stood straight and settled back onto his throne once more. "Powers is indeed becoming a problem, however. I have no proof of his complicity in this affair, but I feel it in my very bones. The man seeks to end my rule, perhaps even my life, though he would do so in secret in order to please his council. He lies even to my face."

"You confronted him, my king?" Rattlor asked.

"Yes, but the man is as much of a master of deception as I am," Hiss replied. "Still, I don't feel he will be a problem again any time soon. My visit saw to that. One day he will pay for his actions, with or without the approval of that sham of a council. And when he does, all of Zalesia will fall due to his hubris. In the meantime, you are to focus on Grayskull."

"Do you think Grayskull will be back?" Rattlor asked.

Hiss sneered. "I couldn't care less if he plans to come back to my territory, I want him dead!" he yelled.

Rattlor cowered in response to his king's anger. "It will be done, my lord."

"See that it is, and that it is done quickly," Hiss commanded. "Hunt the wanderer and his companions down and slaughter them before they become even more of a nuisance." When Rattlor didn't move, remaining on the floor, Hiss sat forward quickly and shouted, "Go!"

The general leapt to his feet and made his way to the throne room's exit as quickly as possible. Hiss leaned back in his chair and felt the floor rumble beneath him, followed by a low moan. "Soon, my pet," he said into the empty room. "Soon."

9.

RECRUITING

Adora walked with Adam through the city of Talok, the two siblings marveling at the mixture of ancient technology that would have been cutting edge even in their time and the sandstone architecture that was just as equally out of place in the middle of the evergreen location the city called home. Apparently, at one point in the distant past, this had all been desert. As Veena had told them, it was obvious that much of the world's history had been lost to the passage of time, and it wasn't much of a stretch to assume that its topography had also changed radically. How much more had been lost than just this city? There was no way to know for sure, but Adora was beginning to understand Veena's sadness at its absence. Much of this world, even now, would be gone or drastically changed within the next thousand years leading up to the time period the twins called home. Moreover, there were any number of civilizations that came before even this ancient city. It was daunting to try to envision the amount. Now, however, they were nothing more than dust; their histories gone forever, as if they'd never existed at all.

The four companions had now been in Talok City for several days. Neither Adora nor Adam knew why they lingered here, but Veena assured them privately that there was a reason for their stay. As the days had passed, the siblings watched

Veena and D'Vann grow closer. The twins knew, of course, that the two would eventually be married, but they were surprised at how organically the pair's relationship was forming. As the Goddess herself, Veena could simply will Grayskull to love her, but this was real. Looking in both of their eyes, she could almost feel it herself. "His aura burns with the brightness of a star when I look at him," Veena had told her privately the previous night. "I am drawn to him as a moth to a flame, inescapably captivated despite the danger."

"That's love," Adora had told her. She knew from the stories Adam told, that Grayskull would die young. Upon that thought, Adora realized just how uncomfortable it made her feel to know the future of her new friends' lives and with that realization, drove them from her mind, focusing instead on the city around her. Grayskull was taking them to an eatery he frequented whenever he was in Talok. As they approached a building with a simple wooden sign hung outside that read "Food and Ale," the man smiled broadly, looking to the rest of the group for approval. "Is this it?" Adora asked.

"Aye," Grayskull replied. "The best food and drink in all of Talok City, though it has been years since I've been here." Pushing open the building's door, they walked inside. Adora was surprised to see that, unlike many of the places D'Vann seemed to enjoy, this one was well-lit, though that fact made the rather unsavory nature of its customers all the more noticeable. The eatery was mostly empty at this time of day, apparently more of a nightspot, and those very customers couldn't help but take immediate notice of Adora and her group's entrance. Adora, her brother, and Grayskull were all armored and armed, while Veena wore rags in such poor condition that they made her stand out even in this age. Adora felt a sudden flush of shame as she realized that Veena had asked for nothing despite being here for days and made a mental note to get her some better clothes somehow, despite not having any of this age's currency. Due to their group's appearances, most of Talok's citizens had given them a wide berth, or at least been overly kind to them during their stay, but this would apparently be a very different situation. A motley crew of warriors sitting at the bar turned and faced them as the door closed, each one taking them in slowly, making it obvious even to an amateur that they were sizing them up. More than likely, they made it obvious on purpose. They were looking for trouble.

There were four of them in total, each one possessing impressive musculature and an imposing look in their eyes to accompany it. The one furthest to the left had blue, almost gray eyes, and long blond hair that hung halfway down his back. He wore a silver headpiece with sculpted wings protruding from its sides. Adora wasn't familiar with the geography of this age, but going by his fair hair and thick beard, she had to assume that he was from the cold northern lands. He wore

light steel armor that was more decorative than functional. He was apparently very confident in his fighting abilities. As his eyes pierced her own, he nudged the man sitting to the right of him and gave a small chuckle. Apparently, he wasn't impressed with what he saw. The other man nodded and smiled. This second warrior looked to be nearly the size of Grayskull himself and wore leather armor, dyed a color that was nearly turquoise. His right shoulder was armored with a gold pauldron. The man's head was closely-shaven other than a thick red beard, much longer than his comrade's, the end of which touched his chest. Completing the look was a ram-horned golden helm which he lifted from the bar counter and placed upon his head as he eyed them. The third of the group was another near-giant, clean-shaven and bald with a blind right eye, whitened over with scar tissue. He wore no armor at all, clad only in a loincloth and furred boots. In some ways, this made him even more intimidating. The fourth and final man was a Gar. Unlike the various Gar they'd seen in Zalesia, he wore no technological armor or flowing robes, dressed instead in the simple silver armor and the furs of a barbarian. A blue hood hid some of the details of his face.

The second man, with the red beard, stood. Adora saw two dangerous looking axes attached to his leather belt, one hanging from each hip. The other three men mirrored his movements, standing up to face Adora and her friends. The man with the red beard appeared to be the leader. He walked toward Grayskull and was large enough that he looked the giant champion of Zoar eye-to-eye as they edged closer to each other, nearly touching. Slowly and quietly, the barkeep backed his way to a door behind the counter and exited the room, leaving the eight of them alone. The scene was making Adora nervous, despite the power of Zoar flowing through her, and she instinctively reached for her staff, unclasping it from her belt. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her brother Adam doing much the same, reaching for the Star Sword upon his own back. Without warning, Red Beard slammed Grayskull's chest with the palms of both of his hands, shoving D'Vann back hard and staggering him, much to Adora's surprise. Both she and Adam drew their weapons in an instant, just waiting for D'Vann to make the call. In that same moment, Grayskull recovered his balance and, with a fierce look upon his face, returned the shove, knocking the opposing man back several feet. Adora extended the Staff of Ka to its full length and was ready to rush them all when Red Beard suddenly smiled and let out a mighty laugh, spreading his arms wide for an embrace, which D'Vann quickly gave him, joining in with a boisterous laugh of his own. Adora looked to Adam, but he was simply returning the same befuddled look that she was giving him.

Letting go of the man, Grayskull turned toward them and smiled broadly. "You may sheath your weapons. Gorr the Red and his comrades are old friends."

"You could have mentioned that sooner," Adam replied as he returned the Star Sword to its sheath.

"And spoil th' fun?" Gorr responded, now laughing so hard he had to brace himself against the counter behind him. He spoke with an accent that Adora didn't recognize. It seemed to be dialect of the common tongue, rather than the accent of a non-native speaker. She wondered to herself where he was from.

"I am sorry," D'Vann said, "it has been many years since I have seen these men. Our tense greeting is practically a ritual."

"An' we like to make th' people around us sweat," Gorr said with another laugh.

Grayskull pointed toward the man with the long blond hair. "This is Val-Or of the North. He was once the leader of his great people until his lands were overrun by Hiss."

Val-Or nodded silently in greeting.

"He doesn't speak," Grayskull continued, "for Hiss cut out his tongue due to Val-Or's speeches against him. The man to his right is Gorr's younger brother, Bash," Grayskull continued, pointing to the man with the blind right eye. "He looks sinister, but is as gentle as a kitten." He cracked a smile as the man grunted disapprovingly. "Unless you provoke him. In such times, he is fierce as Granger. His eye was blinded by a Snake Man's venom after it had killed his wife Melisandre. He killed that Snake Man and swore then and there that it would only be the first of many. Bash doesn't speak much either, but when he does it's sure to have meaning." Indicating the Gar, he continued. "This is Kordus, a sorcerer of the highest order. He left Zalesia due to their treaty with Hiss. He couldn't abide it." D'Vann finally indicated the last man, whom he'd embraced.

"An' I am known as Gorr th' Red," the helmed man interrupted, "as has been revealed already. I'll introduce myself to ye for I fear what Grayskull would say about me." He smiled. "I myself have no tragic story stemming from some awful action of Hiss or his men, I just hate th' scaly bastard," he said with a laugh. He turned back to Grayskull. "Who are yer friends?"

Adam was the first to speak up. "I'm He-Man, and this is my sister, She-Ra," he said, indicating her.

"And I am Veena, Priestess of Zoar," Veena said. "It is good to meet warriors openly against Hiss and his followers. Too many these days are afraid."

"Fear isn't in our vocabulary, Milady," Gorr replied. "I'm happy to see that D'Vann here has some real friends besides that mangy beast that follows him about. Where is ol' Granger, anyway?"

"You know him," Grayskull replied. "Probably sowing his oats." He chuckled. "He shows up when he's needed. It is truly some kind of providence to see you all. What brings you to Talok?" he asked,

"Powers told us we might find you 'ere," Gorr replied.

"Nikolas?" Grayskull asked. "Surely you are not the rebels he spoke of?"

"And why not?" Gorr asked with a grin. "His money's as good as any. What we don't know is why he sent us to find ye'. Are ye' in trouble? Nay, of course ye' are. Ye've always been good at that," he laughed. "I should just ask, 'with who?'"

"Hiss," Grayskull said. "We infiltrated the Temple of Serpos on a mission for Zoar. Afterward, his men were scouring the entire local area searching for us and we had to come here via the mountains. Our intentions had been to return to Zalesia. Nikolas must have realized something was wrong when we didn't arrive and arranged for you to meet us here."

"Ye infiltrated th' temple?" Gorr asked. "And not only that, but ye came 'ere via th' most difficult route? I'm impressed. I take it that yer' back to adventuring for Zoar then?"

"I know you have your doubts, my friend, but I assure you that she is real," Grayskull replied. "My companions He-Man and She-Ra here were sent to me by the Goddess herself. Veena was imprisoned at the temple before we freed her. What are the odds of finding the last remaining Zoar priestess in a temple dedicated to Serpos?"

"I've never doubted yer faith, brother," Gorr said. "So Veena was imprisoned by Hiss? That explains th' sadly state of her attire. I mean no offense, Darlin, but we must find ye some clothing worthy of yer beauty."

Veena blushed slightly and Adora couldn't help but notice Grayskull's annoyance. Adora tried to fight the smile that crossed her face at the sight, but failed.

"Come," Gorr said. "Join us for a hearty meal and catch us up on yer mission as we eat. After that, we buy this woman some proper clothes."

"Catch you up?" Adam asked.

"Well, yes," Gorr replied. "Powers obviously sent us 'ere for a reason. Besides, it's been far too long since I've joined my friend in battle. Whatever your mission, we are joining you, of course. But enough talk. First, food."

"And drinks," Grayskull added.

"Of course drinks, ye idjit," Gorr said with a laugh. "Mind who yer' talk'n to."

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After they had eaten, Gorr and his companions took them all to the garment district of the city and purchased Veena a new ensemble. Clad in sandals and a hooded white linen robe accented with embroidery, she looked stunning and Adora marveled at the woman's unique beauty. When Veena caught sight of Grayskull's expression upon seeing her, she smiled warmly.

"You look absolutely beautiful," he said in a voice so quiet that it was almost a whisper.

"Thank you," she said simply, although it was obvious that his reaction pleased her greatly.

"Now that is the look of a proper Priestess of Zoar," Gorr said. "Wouldn't ye agree, Bash?"

"Aye," the man replied.

"Truly, both ladies are resplendent," Kordus said. They were the first words that either man had spoken since Adora had met them.

Adora thanked Kordus for the compliment and quietly excused herself to find a sword, making her way to an area of the city where the blacksmiths were peddling their wares. There were arms of many styles and shields to compliment them littering the shoulders of the city's main road. Adora glanced around at the many vendors surrounding them. She felt the Staff of Ka hooked to the rear of her belt and sighed. *This staff is excellent, she thought, but I miss the feeling of a sword in my hand.* She felt herself smile as she began to shop. Although Adora was well-trained with a staff, she'd always been more comfortable with a blade. She felt most like herself when she was holding the hilt of a sword. It was something from her childhood with The Horde that she couldn't shake, despite having had her eyes opened to Hordak's evil and leaving the group years ago. Besides, she now had

the power of Zoar flowing through her permanently. She was She-Ra once again, albeit in a new way. Added to that, she had her powerful Starburst armor to protect her. An enchanted weapon almost seemed like overkill, especially to someone of her skill. She preferred the challenge. A simple sword would do, if she could find one made of good steel that had the proper balance and a sharp edge. She was confident that she would be able to find one among such a broad selection and the search was half of the fun.

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Adam watched his sister walk away from the group on the search for a new blade and smiled. She'd grown much since she'd returned to Etheria years ago, bringing the fight to Hordak's doorstep. She was still younger than him, of course, due to the passage of time being different on Etheria than it was on Tellus, but she'd grown so much as a person that he couldn't help but be proud of her. In many ways, she now seemed more grown up than he was. When Adora had first left to join Etheria's Great Rebellion, she'd still struggled with her inner demon: her alter ego Despara. She wouldn't have admitted it, of course, but Adam knew. No one could shake an entire upbringing in just one year away from home, especially when that upbringing was full of indoctrination and brainwashing. Adam hadn't hesitated in inviting his newly-found twin sister to live with him and his family in Eternos Palace, but he'd known even then that a darkness remained within her that she hadn't yet managed to purge. In the year she'd spent with them, she'd often been moody and, on more than one occasion, had left the palace altogether to wander the wilderness in an attempt to try and find some peace within the tumultuous sea of emotions she'd felt churning within her. Adora had always been good to Teela and Dare, and of course to Randor. She wanted desperately to experience the familial love that she hadn't received as a child, but Adam had always sensed a feeling of jealousy from her as far as he was concerned. After all, he'd been raised in a loving family and she'd been raised by that despotic monster Hordak. It was only natural that she would envy him to a degree, even though she knew that their separation as infants was not something he had any control over. He had just been an innocent babe at the time, same as her. Adam had noticed his sister's jealousy lessen over time and she eventually learned to love him as her brother, but it wasn't something that had happened overnight. He'd never expected it to, but he was glad to see her finally come around. It wasn't long after that, however, that she'd left for Etheria, returning to the war and leaving her newfound family behind. Her sense of duty to the world she'd grown up on demanded it.

Although Adam was proud of her decision to return to Etheria to free it from Hordak's tyranny, he still felt heartbroken by her decision. They'd just begun to make some real progress in their relationship. She'd finally accepted him as her brother, as someone she could confide in and care for. He'd kept his disappointment to himself, of course. He had longed to befriend his sister, to really feel as if their family was once again whole, and just when things were beginning to head in that direction, she'd left. Of course, he understood. Etheria was her home, and Hordak's rule was poisoning it. She'd had to join the rebellion against the evil warlord and fight him. She wanted to, but he suspected that she also felt she'd had no choice. Adam had just hated being separated from her for a second time.

It had now been several years since she'd left. Despite the length of time not being as great for her, she'd used it to grow into a strong woman, now fully free of Hordak's influence. To see her smiling and enjoying being on this incredible adventure through time with him brought Adam joy. Perhaps she cared more for him than he had once thought. He only hoped that, when all of this was said and done, and they'd returned to their future, that they would finally fulfill the prophecy and defeat Hordak once and for all. He hoped, perhaps selfishly, that with Hordak gone, Adora might be able to come home for good. They'd spent enough years apart.

"He-Man, may we speak privately?"

Adam turned to see Veena approaching him, leaving Grayskull to catch up with his old friends. "Of course," he replied. She indicated a balcony that looked out over the lower levels of the city and began walking toward it. He joined her at its edge, taking in the beauty of Talok City and its rich history. "What is it?" he asked.

"I know that you long to return to your family, Adam. I just wanted you to know that you and your sister's time here is nearly at an end."

"Really?" he asked. "That is wonderful news. I'd expected that Grayskull would not become king for some time."

"Your mission is to set him on the path, and you will. The warriors that have joined us are the first step toward the throne. They are instrumental in aiding him. However, our next step must be the Council of Elders. Grayskull will never become king without their approval."

"It was my understanding that they have a treaty with Hiss," he replied.

"Only due to their fear of him," she said. "They have known of D'Vann for years, but he was alone more often than not, save for Granger. He has fought with these warriors before, true, but not for a great cause. Now, they have united against Hiss, although none of them realize just how far that alliance will take them."

"So, you think Graykull's having allies will help him gain favor with the Council?" Adam asked.

"I think it will give them the confidence to make the move against Hiss that they have wanted to make for so long," she answered. "Grayskull, they have feared, would fail if he fought against Hiss and his army alone, but now, with the aid of these warriors, not to mention you and your sister, they will see that he has the chance to be victorious. It may be the push that they need."

"So how do we convince the Council?" he asked.

"We will be before them before too long."

"It'll be that simple?"

"No," she replied. "It will not be simple, but when they see that Grayskull has begun amassing warriors, they will rally behind him and then, in time, others will follow. Humankind is not as weak as it fears it is. Hiss has kept so many of these people subjugated for so long that they accept his words detailing their weaknesses as fact when in reality there is much strength to be found within them."

"They just have to believe that they can win," he said.

Veena turned toward him and smiled warmly. "You begin to understand. You've not been He-Man for so long now that you've begun to forget the hope that he inspired, the strength that he gave people to rise up against evil. From this battle with Hiss, to the war that you and Adora will meet head on when you return to your time, it is hope that will win out over fear. Never forget that, Adam."

"Thank you for reminding me, but I do have one question."

"And what is that?"

"How in the world are we going to convince Grayskull that he needs to become king?"

"Let me handle that," she answered. "It is the will of Zoar, after all."

"Yes, of course," he replied. "Which is why I agree that it would be best if Zoar told him herself, or at least her priestess."

"Indeed, and I know that once he is committed, he will do everything in his power to overthrow Hiss. He is more than tired of the serpentine king's rule, as are many of the people in these lands. They remember when Grayskull was a traveling hero. It has been some time yes, but the people do not forget goodness so easily in these dark times. There are many who will follow him. They just have to get past their fear of Hiss."

"With the help of a little hope," Adam replied.

"A lot of hope," Veena said, "but I have no doubt that you and your sister can inspire it. In many ways, that is why you are here."

10.

A TREATY BROKEN

Rattlor stood at the peak of the mountain and took in the sight of Talok City through his ocularis, a handheld device that allowed the user to see over great distances. Lowering it, he grunted. It was further than he'd thought, but he was sure that that was where he would find Grayskull. The humans' precious Council of Elders was housed there and Rattlor had a feeling that they were up to no good, perhaps even ready to violate the treaty they had made with King Hiss. In fact, they may have already if Nikolas Powers was as duplicitous as Hiss suspected. If that was the case, war would be upon them. Rattlor hoped so. He had had more than enough of peace. He was ready for blood and blood is what he'd have as soon as he found Grayskull.

The general and twelve of his men, hand-picked by Rattlor himself, had discovered Grayskull's trail back at a cave system that had, until then, been unknown to the Snake Men. The trail had been hard to follow within the caves themselves, but when they had finally made their way through the complex series of tunnels, they were able to pick it up once more in the Mountains of Gnarl. It had taken them days to make it this far. Grayskull and at least two of his companions had been gifted by Zoar's font. The trek for them had more than likely been

relatively easy. For Rattlor and his men, it had taken a considerable amount of time and energy. They were all tired and hungry at this point. Still, Rattlor forced them to press on. He had seen firsthand what King Hiss did to those who failed him. So far, he'd gotten off lightly. He knew that that would not remain the case if he were to fail again. Unfortunately for Grayskull and his friends, that wasn't going to happen.

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Adam admired Adora's new sword, graciously purchased for her by the warrior Bash, who did so in the memory of his wife. Apparently, Adora reminded him of her. "It's an elegant blade," she told him, "though of course I miss my Sword of Protection. When we get back, I swear I'm going to kiss that thing."

Adam laughed. "That's a bit odd, but I suppose I understand. When you've carried a weapon at your side for years, it's a strange feeling to be without it." He knew that feeling all too well, himself.

"Indeed," she agreed.

"And the Staff of Ka?" he asked.

"Still safe with me," Adora answered, patting the spot where it hung from her belt. "I'm just more comfortable with a sword." She was silent for a moment before speaking again. "I wonder how long we will be in this place? I'm enjoying our time together, but I'm starting to worry."

Adam nodded. "I've been feeling the same way, but Veena assures me that our mission in this time period is almost over. Now that Grayskull has more warriors at his side, she claims that the Council of Elders will endorse him as king, provided he can defeat Hiss, of course."

"So, who gets the lucky job of telling D'Vann that he needs to become king?" Adora asked.

"Veena said she'll convince him," he said. "I saw them talking before, but I haven't had a chance to ask either of them about it. Still, you and I both know her true identity, but even as the priestess of Zoar that she's presenting herself to be, her words should carry a lot of weight with the man."

"True," Adora conceded, "though I have to admit that it's hard to imagine him as king. It doesn't seem like it would suit him."

"I agree, but I never thought it would suit me either, and yet here I am," he replied. "She said that we have to have the support of the Council of Elders, and that we'll meet them, but I don't know how we're going to manage that. Everything I know about them from history points to their being very secretive and well-protected." As Adam spoke, his eyes tracked the movements of several hooded figures, a half-dozen, at the far end of the merchants' selling area.

"What is it?" Adora asked.

His eyes narrowed. "It could be nothing," he said. "But then again, it could be someth—" He was cut off as the hooded figures caught sight of him and began running toward them.

"What?" Adora repeated, this time turning to see the men for herself just as they shed their robed garments, their scales now glistening in the noonday sun.

"Snake Men," Adam replied. "We need to get these people out of here before things get ugly." Seeing the Snake Men for themselves, merchants and buyers alike scattered with yelps of surprise. Some screamed in fear. It had been years since a Snake Man had been seen in Talok City, since the treaty had been signed.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem, brother," Adora said. "They know something is wrong. Where are Grayskull and the others?"

"Nearby," he answered. "I don't know exactly, but I think they'll hear us soon enough." Within seconds, the Snake Men had drawn their weapons and were within yards of the two of them. Adora and Adam each drew their swords and dropped into defensive positions in response.

"For the king!" one of the serpents screamed as they each launched themselves into the air, flying toward Adam and Adora with deadly precision.

The Snake Men's blades swung down viciously, but the twins leapt to the side just as their adversaries landed. The square was quickly filled with the sounds of steel clanging against steel as their weapons met. With the power of Zoar flowing through them, Adam and Adora made quick work of their enemies, leaving the Snake Men groaning on the street afterward. Adora turned to see a seventh approaching from a side alley. "He-Man, to your left!" she yelled, but not before her brother was stuck hard with the beast's tail, sending him flying into one of the merchant's tables, exploding it into splinters as various glass baubles shattered on the stone street.

The Snake Man responsible stood upright and flicked his tongue at her. His left arm hung at his side, considerably smaller than the right. Seeing it, she realized that it was in fact a new growth replacing a lost limb. "Where'sss Grayskull?" he asked with a hiss.

"I know you," she said. "It's strange that you would seek Grayskull out considering how badly he hurt you the last time you encountered him."

Rattlor looked down at the stump of his left arm and hissed furiously. "This one owes him," he said. "And him," he continued, nodding toward where her brother was finding his feet once more.

"So, you've come for blood?" Adora asked.

"I serve my master'sss will," he replied, "but this time, hiss's will is my own." He leapt at her and she swung her newly acquired sword in an upward angle. Even with the power of Zoar flowing through her, the creature deflected the weapon with a powerful blow of its right arm, staggering her. Adam appeared before he could land a second strike on her however, smashing into the beast's side and tackling him into another table. Her brother then took an incredibly strong blow to the jaw, the sound of impact making a resounding crack. This creature was strong, she realized. Stronger than she'd expected. Adam stumbled and rejoined her, the creature standing back at its full height once more, at least two heads taller than either of them. "Where isss Grayskull?" it asked again.

"I'm sure he'll be here any minute," she said.

He laughed. "Good. Let him come to your aid far too late." With those words, he let out a loud roar and six more Snake Men dropped from the nearby rooftops, surrounding them.

"I hope they get here soon," Adam said.

"And spoil all of the fun?" Adora asked with a wry smile. The six newcomers jumped them, bringing both of them down to the ground in a mad struggle. With loud grunts of exertion, all six were then flung back as Adam and Adora threw them aside. The two of them went back-to-back and held their weapons at the ready.

"Did we miss anything?" Grayskull said. All of them turned to see Grayskull flanked by Gorr, Bash, Val-Or and Kordus, each of them brandishing their weapons. Between the lot of them and the seven Snake Men, the odds were now even.

"We were just talking about you," Adora replied. "Glad you could join us."

"Well, we were in the area," Grayskull quipped. Looking past her and her brother, Grayskull took in the sight of the giant Snake Man who was obviously the leader. "Rattlor, I see your arm is growing back." Rattlor sneered silently while Grayskull spoke. "I'm happy for you as I understand that your mother misses your gentle caress." Rattlor's nostrils flared as he bared his fangs and hissed.

"I thought it was his sister," Gorr said. "I can never remember."

Grayskull and his friends' laughter sent Rattlor into a frenzy. "Kill them all!" he screamed.

The six other Snake Men rushed their enemies with a combined hiss, swords drawn and ready to draw blood. Unfortunately for them, Grayskull and his companions far outmatched them. Grayskull's battle axe dispatched his opponent in seconds, meanwhile Gorr swung his twin axes, felling his opponent with little effort. Bash followed suit with his spiked mace, knocking a Snake Man nearly a dozen feet away with his powerful blow. Kordus likewise drew his sabre and took out two of them, much to the chagrin of Val-Or, who didn't get to land a single strike with his broadsword. Kordus shrugged sheepishly in response to the glare he received from his silent friend. In a matter of moments, Rattlor was once again standing alone. With a growl of anger, the general ran in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" Grayskull bellowed. "We're not even sweating!"

Gorr laughed at his friend's bravado before saying what they were all thinking. "That's not th' last we'll see of him though, I'm afraid, and next time, he'll have more than just a handful of warriors by his side."

"Aye," Grayskull agreed. "Surely, he didn't expect me to have picked up more allies in my time here. He thought he had enough men."

"Many thought ye were crazy," Gorr admitted. "Always going on about Zoar. Now, ye say that she has sent these two warriors to aid ye, not to mention the fact that ye travel with one of her priestesses." Hanging his axes from his belt once more, Gorr looked at his friend D'Vann and smiled. "Ye may make a believer of me, yet."

"I am happy merely to have your help," Grayskull replied.

"And ye have it. Mine and that of my men 'ere," Gorr said, indicating the others. "Be that as it may, what is the goal here, Grayskull? Are we to overthrow Hiss once and for all?"

Grayskull was about to speak but, before he could answer, more than a dozen armed city guards rushed onto the scene. "You're late," Grayskull chided.

The center guard spoke first. "We didn't come to aid you, barbarian. You are to come with us."

"For what reason?" Grayskull asked.

The guard looked around incredulously at the damages their battle had caused. "You need to ask?"

"We were attacked," Grayskull reasoned. "Surely you see the Snake Men at our feet."

The guard nodded. "Aye. They are the very reason that you and your friends must come with us. You are all under arrest and must report to the Council of Elders immediately."

"For what?" Adam asked. "Defending ourselves?"

"Of course not," the guard replied. "For breaking the peace treaty with King Hiss. For endangering all of us."

"Well, that isn't how I expected us to get in to see the Council," Adam whispered to his sister.

Adora glanced at him and smiled. "Veena said we'd meet them. I guess she was right." Her smile faded as the guard and each of his compatriots leveled heavy laser rifles at them.

"This is the last time I'll ask," the guard said. "Hand over your weapons and come with us." With the click of a button, he primed his weapon before continuing, the humming vibration that emanated from it sounding like the fear-inducing growl of Granger himself. "Now."

11.

COUNCIL OF ELDERS

Adam and his six companions were led, weaponless but not bound in any way, into the tallest building within Talok City, known as the Hall of Elders. They went peacefully, as Veena had explained to the group that it was in humanity's best interest for the Council to see that there were those willing to defy King Hiss and his army, and that those people were good. Gorr and his men had seemed less sure, and Grayskull himself remained silent. Adam wondered how much Veena had told the man. He knew that she wouldn't divulge anything specific about the future as such a thing could in theory be very dangerous, but Adam assumed she'd encouraged him to become a leader of men. Grayskull himself had told Adam and his sister before they'd infiltrated the Temple of Serpos that he wished to one day free all of Hiss's slaves from captivity, even the ones who abided his rule and didn't realize that they were his slaves at all. To Hiss, all humans were an inferior race and, having had a large part of the world under his control for nearly three centuries, this belief had been enforced to the point that even some of the humans themselves believed it. Adam only hoped that Grayskull was ready for the responsibilities of being a ruler. The man would become king, of that Adam was certain, but if Adam had learned anything on this trip to the distant past, it was that history was not always what he was taught that it was. In fact, he'd now wager that it seldom was.

The interior of the building itself was elaborately decorated. Ornate windows with intricately embroidered curtains lined the walls. The opulence on display in the Hall was not awe-inspiring to Adam at all, but rather disappointing; much like the grandeur of Zalesia, it left him with a bad taste in his mouth. These locations prospered at the expense of the rest of the human world, which suffered under Hiss's rule. Adam came from a time, and a lineage of kings, that believed in equality and taking care of one's people. In this time, things were much different. It was a time where a select few prospered greatly and did little to help those who could not do the same. Adam had been taught by his father that everyone was equally deserving of happiness. In a society as unbalanced as this one, those in power thrived by denying happiness to the ones they considered beneath them. Those who tried to work their way up the ladder of society were pushed back down in response. Unless they were a Snake Man, one had little hope of succeeding in this time period. If it continued in this way, this world was bound to collapse under the weight of its own greed. Adam knew that Grayskull would come to be the catalyst for that change and he didn't envy the challenge his ancestor had ahead of him.

He and his group were led into a large antechamber and further still to a staircase made of white marble, large enough that it spread across the entire expanse of the room. Once they'd reached the crest of the staircase and the door it led to, the city guards opened it, escorting them into an even larger room. Rising from the floor were three marble columns, each at least fifteen feet in diameter. Atop each column arose a holographic representation of the Council of Elders' members, each sitting cross-legged. There were two females, on either end, and one male, who sat between them. The woman on the left was an ebony human, while the one on the right was Gar. All three council members had their heads shaved to the scalp. The man however, had a long white beard that billowed out almost comically.

Adam surmised that the holograms, and their larger than life stature, served two purposes simultaneously. One was that it was meant to invoke awe, to make the Elders appear almost godlike. The other was likely for the Elders' own protection. In fact, the Elders themselves may not be in the city at all, he realized. The entire display was smoke and mirrors in the guise of nobility. Nevertheless, Adam saw that his companions from this age did indeed look awed and impressed. It was entirely possible that holographic technology was not as prevalent in this age as it was in his own. Could it be yet another holdover from before the Great Wars? The age before the Great Wars was beginning to fascinate him and he imagined that he would maintain that interest long after he'd returned home. There was so much to learn from what had come before, if more traces of it could be found.

"Guards, you may leave us," the woman on the left said, her voice a soft contrast to her imposing holographic image. The guards hesitated, but did as they were commanded, shutting the door behind them as they left. Now the room's occupants consisted solely of Adam, Adora and their companions. Adam wasn't sure whether or not he could count the holographic presence of the Elders.

Looking down at them from their marble columns, the Council remained silent just long enough for Adam to start feeling uncomfortable. Eventually, the woman on the right, the gar, spoke. "You stand accused of breaking the treaty with King Hiss of the Snake Men. What say you in your defense?"

"It was he who broke the treaty, Milady," Grayskull said. "He sent his soldiers to openly attack us in the marketplace, so we fought. We fight for you, for our people, for we know that, in time, the ruler of the Snake Men would see us all dead, treaty or no treaty."

"Their attack was unprovoked, then?" the male Elder asked.

"Entirely," Gorr the Red replied, stepping forward to stand next to his friend.

The Elder on the left sighed. "Do you take us for fools?"

"I fail to understand the question," Grayskull responded. "Why do you doubt our word?"

"Because they already know that you provoked me when you invaded the temple of my god and desecrated it," a hologram of King Hiss said, materializing before the group at his normal size, merely a dozen feet or so in front of them. He appeared in the guise of a man wearing dragon-scaled green armor.

If Grayskull could have reached out and strangled the duplicitous creature, he would have. "Hiss," he growled.

"D'Vann Grayskull, I presume?" the hologram of Hiss asked. "I've heard many a tale about you, barbarian. This is the first time I've seen you in person. I'm not impressed."

Grayskull looked up at the Elders once more. "You would make a mockery of this council by inviting this," he paused, choosing his words carefully, "thing here to speak against your own people?" The Elders remained silent.

"Do not focus your eyes on those crusty old idiots," Hiss replied, dismissing the Council with a wave of his hand, "when your king stands before you."

"You are no king of mine," Grayskull said, his eyes shooting daggers at the man whose rule had kept him a slave for much of his childhood and continued to enslave countless others.

"Your Elders would claim otherwise, Brute," Hiss responded. "I learned quite a bit about you after speaking with your friend Nikolas Powers. He was very forthcoming, once he had the proper persuasion. You, D'Vann Grayskull, were born on my lands and indeed were a slave of my people until you escaped, an escape which your people's treaty with me condemns. So, you see, not only am I your king, but you are, in fact, my property."

"I am no man's property, vile serpent!" Grayskull shouted, giving up on trying to retain a calm demeanor.

"Again, D'Vann, your council disagrees," Hiss retorted. "You belong to me, as does your priestess friend that you stole from me. As such, they have apologized to me for your behavior and have promised your safe return to me and my slavers. Once I have you back home once again, I promise you that you will regret invading my temple." He eyed Veena as he spoke. "Soon enough you will both learn what it is to be broken."

"The only thing broken will be your bloody neck!" Grayskull roared.

While the Council of Elders recoiled from Grayskull's rage, Hiss merely smiled, the expression looking out of place upon his granite-like features. For a split-second, Hiss's ruse flickered and failed; his skin showing its true, scaly nature as he briefly lost his concentration. He quickly recovered and maintained his human disguise. "You have much fire in you, slave. I look forward to meeting you in person. I will see you and the priestess soon. I have little interest in the others," he said, addressing the Council for the first time. "You can do with them as you wish." The holographic image then flickered and was gone.

"How can you let this stand?" Grayskull demanded of the Elders. "How can you let this monster run roughshod over your people, the very people who put their faith in you and your wisdom? How can you let him continue to rule?"

"What would you have us do?" the Gar elder asked. "We must maintain peace."

"Your peace is a lie!" Grayskull shouted, his hands shaking with anger. "The thing you call peace is merely subjugation, propped up on the bones of what was once the pride of humankind. This city and this Council have long been symbols of hope for many who will never know freedom, for they died due to the very lie that

you yourselves sold them. For far too long have you bartered your people's blood for your own security. Damn you! For years, I slaved away, watching my family and countless others like it be torn apart by Hiss and his army. When I escaped, I swore to myself, nay, to my very goddess, that I would never again allow such a thing to happen; that one day I would return to those lands and free every last one of Hiss's slaves; that I would destroy that monster once and for all. Over time I lost my way, forgot my promise, and now when I stand here and look at you I see that same weakness; my weakness. I see it in you and it sickens me. I remember that promise now and once again I say that I will fight! With or without your approval. I say that I am here to fight for you, for our people, and you, you servile vipers, you still betray me to Hiss for the sake of the lie that you call peace." Grayskull's face dripped with sweat as he looked to the floor. "Damn you," he repeated.

Adam had never seen the man so enraged, had never seen the pain that Grayskull carried displayed so openly. He knew now, in that instant, that his ancestor was every bit the man he'd read about as a child. He was born to be king. If only the Council could see that truth as well. The three holograms of the Elders remained silent as they flickered and soon enough, they too were gone. The door at their back opened and the bevy of guards entered once more. "You all are to come with us," one of them said. "You will wait in the holding cells below until the Elders pass final judgement." Grayskull merely nodded and followed them, the others in tow.

"Grayskull," Gorr spoke up as they were all chained together in a line, "do ye intend to back up what ye just said?"

"Aye," Grayskull replied. "Every word of it."

Gorr smiled. "Then I will be happy to fight beside ye, when th' time comes. Right to th' end."

"Quiet," the guard said. Once they were chained, they were taken to individual cells on the basement level of the building and locked inside them, each of them wondering what was to come next.

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Grayskull sat down on the lone cot within his cell and rubbed his temples. It had been many years since he'd voiced that kind of anger aloud. It simmered deep within him always, but seldom did he let it boil over as he had in the Council

Chamber. It had been cathartic and yet useless at the same time. He felt as if he'd been shouting at ghosts, as if the Elders' holographic forms were nothing more than ethereal images that heard not a single word he'd said. That is why it was with great surprise that he saw who came to visit him, some hours later. Looking up, his eyes took in the sight of the Elder who'd been seated on the left; the ebony human woman. With a gentle smile, she spoke. "I am Elan," she said in a quiet voice. "We need to talk."

12.

SUBTERFUGE

“Hiss has eyes everywhere, including those of the electronic variety within the Council Chamber itself,” the Council member called Elan explained. “It is not safe to speak there.”

“And it is here?”

“I believe so.”

“You are here of your own accord, then?” Grayskull asked.

“The others, Tay-Lor and R’Bekka, know that I am here. I speak for all of us,” she said. “Do you mean what you say? Will you fight for our people?” The woman stood before him in the flesh, and Grayskull knew that no mere hologram would be able to convey the fear and conflict that he saw within the Council of Elders member’s eyes as she spoke. “Truly?” Her tone was almost pleading.

Grayskull nodded. “I made a promise, though fulfilling it will be difficult if I’m locked within a cell. I have the power to break free,” he admitted, “but I had hoped to have your support. I fear that I will fail without it.”

"You have it," she said.

He took in the sight of the woman and tried to ascertain the validity of her words. She certainly appeared afraid, perhaps they all were, but was that enough to get the Council on his side when it really mattered? "Why the sudden change of heart?" he asked.

"There is nothing sudden about it, I assure you," Elan said as she stood on the opposite side of the cell's barred door. As she looked in on him, he felt like a caged animal on display within a zoo. Then again, maybe the Council felt they needed an animal to take on Hiss and his army. "Long has the Council been unhappy with the situation we find ourselves in," she said. "We wish to keep as many of our people safe as possible, but there is little the Council can do other than negotiate, and often negotiations with Hiss become compromises, if not full acquiescence. We are not warriors."

"You have many warriors who would have fought for you; for our people," Grayskull argued.

"Yes, but none like you," Elan replied. "None who would have had the chance to succeed. Any others would have died for nothing."

"They would have died for honor," Grayskull said angrily as he stood and approached her, separated only by the metal bars between them. "A true warrior would rather die for a cause than live in the shameful society that you have created for them; a society of slaves. You, here in Talok City, and your allies in Zalesia, you are no freer than those who live in under the thumb of Hiss, for you live under it also. You just convince yourselves that you do not. Your treaties and half-measures have created this world. This prison," he indicated the walls that surrounded him, "we are both trapped within it."

"Then help us make things right," Elan said, her voice almost timid. "Help us fix this."

"I will make this right, if you give me the means," he said, "but not for you. I will do it for our people."

"Yes," she said with a nod. "For our people."

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Allow Hiss to take you and your friend," she replied. "Allow him to think that he has won, as he always has in the past. He has never known the Council to be anything other than weak. He will not suspect treachery."

"How does getting captured serve our cause?" he countered.

"Surely you will get close to him. He is a vain ruler and will wish to gloat over his prize," she answered. "You will likely get closer to him than any army we assembled would be able to manage."

Grayskull nodded, beginning to see her logic. With the power of Zoar, and her blessing, he would be able to escape his confinement. He was sure of that. He would likely be killed himself after dispatching Hiss, but perhaps then those opposed to the serpent king would have a chance at taking back the world. Maybe his sacrifice would free his people. "What of my friends?"

"Leave them to us," she replied. "They will be well cared for."

"Surely, I will die in this attack," he said. "It would be good to know that it was for a cause that you will see through."

"We will," she assured him, "and while there is a possibility that you will die," the woman acknowledged, "it is one that I doubt. You can succeed in either event. Die, and you will be a martyr for your people, allowing a free world to rise from your ashes." Elan paused, looking him deep in the eye. "Live," she continued, "and you will be more than just a martyr. You will be their king."

Grayskull's eyes widened. Veena had said that a great destiny awaited him, but this woman's words came as a shock to him. "I have no desire to be king," he replied.

"And that," Elan said with a smile, "is why you will be a great one." He remained silent as she turned to leave. "Arrangements have been made. You and the priestess will leave at dawn." With those words, the woman who represented the Council of Elders left him. Grayskull stared into the empty hallway long after she'd gone.

"You have presented me with a true challenge, my Goddess," he said quietly, hoping that Zoar could hear his words as he looked up. "I accept." Returning to his cot, he laid down to rest. He had a long journey ahead of him. While he felt some shame at the thought of Veena being sent to Hiss with him, for he had vowed to protect her, he took some small comfort in the fact that he would be able to share his journey with a woman as lovely as she. He silently reprimanded himself for his lapse of faith. With a priestess of Zoar with him, victory was assured, and there was no other woman he'd rather have at his side as he attained it.

• • •

Grayskull's wrists were sore from the constant pressure of the iron shackles that held them above his head, tight to the walls of the caged transport that carried himself and Veena on their long journey to the heart of King Hiss's kingdom. She sat across from him, though she was not restrained. Being a human woman, she was not seen as a threat by the Snake Men. In any other situation, Grayskull would have laughed. The serpents knew far less about human women than they thought they did. The servants of Hiss who had come to retrieve them had allowed Veena to keep her new attire and Grayskull was glad for it. He'd already failed his promise to keep her safe. He would have hated himself if he'd allowed her to be humiliated physically as well. Grayskull, in contrast, had been disarmed and stripped of the armor Nikolas had given him, left clad only in his furred loin cloth, which hung low in front and back. Even his feet were bare. He himself felt no shame, however. The power of Zoar flowed through him and he had to have faith that that would be all the armor he'd need.

Veena had thus far remained silent on their journey and he pondered the possibility of her anger. He'd not told her of the Council's plans, or even that he'd spoken to Elan at all. He hadn't had the opportunity and, more than that, he felt he must guard that secret closely, even from her. He wished he could tell her. It was entirely possible that Veena hated him for allowing her to be taken back to Hiss. Her gaze caught his own and the corners of her mouth lifted in a friendly smile, dispelling any such notions immediately. "Do not fear, D'Vann," she said in that soft voice of hers that he'd come to love hearing, "the Goddess is with you." Grayskull nodded. If anyone had more faith in Zoar than he did, it was Veena. Once again, he was happy to have her with him. It was then, and only then, that he flushed at his near nudity. She should not have to see him like this. Noticing his blushing, she smiled once more and looked away, seemingly embarrassed herself.

The transport that carried them was a part of a long convoy and Grayskull suspected that they were not the only prisoners aboard. He only hoped that he could defeat Hiss before any of the poor souls that were with them met an unfortunate end. He wanted to save them, to protect them. For years, he'd wandered, thinking that he was serving Zoar as her champion when, in reality, he was merely serving his own ego. This mission, he knew now, was his true purpose. He had been chosen for this journey, for these moments, and he silently vowed to pay close attention to those moments as they came, and would hold onto them long

after they had drifted into the past. It had been nearly twelve hours to his estimate since they'd left Talok City, and the sun was setting in the distance. He wondered whether they would continue through the night, or stop for sleep. Another hour passed before he had his answer, the caravan slowing to a stop somewhere just outside the Valley of Barathru, judging by the mountain peaks lying to either side ahead of them. They'd made remarkable time, and were indeed within serpent territory, but the valley was dangerous at night and the Snake Men would not want to be taken by surprise by the creatures that hunted by the light of the moon. Instead, it seemed they would wait until morning. There was one thing he was now sure of: they were not going back to the Temple of Serpos. Travelling through the valley was unnecessary to get there. The snakes wouldn't risk traversing the valley if the temple were their destination. So where in blazes were they going? The only place he could think of that made any sense was a city whose name held no secrets: Slave City.

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Grayskull awoke from a fitful sleep and shivered. The night was cold and his skin prickled as a crisp breeze passed through the caged transport that held them. Veena was already awake, her eyes visible in the moonlight. Sensing his discomfort, she crawled toward him within the cramped space and positioned her body next to his own. Wordlessly, she wrapped her arms and legs around him to share her warmth. He was amazed at the heat of her touch and soon began to feel at peace once more. He meant to thank her, but as he looked down at her face, its right side resting comfortably against his chest, he saw that she was already asleep.

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The shaking of the transport, once again on the move, awoke Grayskull for the final time. Veena was no longer holding him, instead sitting across from him just as she had been the day previous. Feeling the heat of the sun upon his skin, a stark contrast to the cold he'd remembered, he wondered if their embrace had been but a dream. He looked outward, the mountain ranges on either side of the caravan confirming his earlier thoughts regarding their route. They were deep in the midst of the Valley of Barathru, now certainly on their way to Slave City, where King Hiss would be awaiting them. Grayskull wondered if the old snake would

consider the wait worth it once his newly prized possession had its hands wrapped around his throat, squeezing the life from his vile body. "Do you know where they are taking us?" Veena asked, snapping his mind back from fantasy.

"Slave City, most likely," he answered. "It is almost a straight line from here to there, that is if we continue traveling northeast."

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

"No," he answered, with no doubt in his voice.

"How can you not be?"

Grayskull looked to the sky briefly before he answered. "I feel that my Goddess is with me."

"She is always with you," Veena replied.

Grayskull nodded. "I have felt her presence more as of late."

Veena was silent for a long moment before speaking again. "Will we be separated once we get there?"

"I do not know, though I suspect that we will be, yes," he answered, catching a brief look of sadness in her eyes before she looked away from him and back toward the rest of the caravan ahead of them.

In time, she turned to face him again. "Then we should make the most of our time here," she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Making her way toward him, she took his face in her hands and brought her lips to his. The priestess's kiss was gentle at first, like the light brushing of rose petals against the skin, before increasing in its intensity. After what felt like forever, she pulled away breathlessly. "Forgive me, but I knew you would never be so bold on your own," she said, smiling.

"You are a priestess of Zoar," he replied, bewildered by her actions, "and so I did not dare to be."

"My heart leapt the very moment I first saw you, D'Vann Grayskull," she said. "I had thought that I understood love, but being in your presence has shown me how naive I had been. I soon knew that I had never felt true love at any time before. I would make any sacrifice to be with you, D'Vann; to be one with you in the eyes of the universe. Were I the Goddess herself, I would find a way to be with you."

"But your duties—"

"Begin and end with carrying out the will of Zoar," she interrupted, "and how could it not be her will if I, her servant, feel this so strongly?"

"I don't, I—" he stammered.

"Do you not feel the same?" she asked, pulling away further still. Her eyes welled with tears, embarrassed at her own boldness.

"I do," he said without hesitation, wishing to put her mind at ease. "It's just difficult for me to articulate my feelings while shackled."

She laughed quietly. "Yes, I suppose that it would be. This is an odd situation in which to proclaim my feelings, surely, but these quiet moments are fleeting. Soon we will be at Hiss's door and in much greater danger."

"Yes."

"Then let us embrace these moments while they are ours to do with as we please." Leaning in, she kissed him once more and this time he returned it vigorously. She embraced him tightly and he welcomed the warmth of her body pressed against his own. Perhaps the previous night had not been a dream after all, but what followed felt equally as ethereal just the same.

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The convoy had traversed the Valley of Barathru in the light of day with no incidents and the sun was now sitting low in the sky. Grayskull could not see ahead due to his chains, but Veena was able to make out what was before them if she placed her head through their transport's bars. "What do you see?" he asked.

Peering through to the best of her ability, Veena looked ahead, using her right hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "I see a large structure, what looks like an arena, surrounded by smaller buildings."

"Slave City," Grayskull confirmed. "As I suspected."

"We are nearly there," she said, a hint of sadness in her voice.

"Everything will be alright," he assured her, "in time."

"I believe you."

They crossed the border into the city just before dark. As the convoy stopped, Snake Men from the city met them and began gathering the newly acquired slaves, of which there were many, from the transports. A half-dozen guards came to the car that held Veena and Grayskull. Veena was held tightly by two of them, leaving the other four to tend to Grayskull, unchaining him. On his way into the city, the four guards surrounded him, one on each side, holding his arms in iron grips, the others positioned ahead and behind him. With his excessive strength, he could have escaped easily, but that was not the plan. Keeping this in mind, he fought to control his temper as Veena was pulled into a separate building with the other slaves. Grayskull, it seemed, would be getting his own private cell. Veena called out to him as they took her, but he merely smiled in return. "Do not fear," he said. In that moment, she was gone from his sight. He prayed to Zoar that she would be alright, vowing that Hiss would pay dearly if any harm came to her.

He was then led into an adjacent building. It, like the others, was made of sandstone, common in this arid place. The building itself was squat, already lit by torchlight. He hadn't had a chance to take in the view of the arena, but assumed that he would be seeing it up close soon enough. His escorts lead him to a cell recessed into the walls, the door made of iron bars. The floor of the cell was simple dirt. "If you attempt eesscape, we will kill the woman," the guard ahead of him said matter-of-factly as it slid the door to the side, the rest of them quickly ushering Grayskull inside. The slam of the door closing echoed throughout the building, followed by the sound of the lock catching within it.

"When do I get to see Hiss?" Grayskull asked. "I demand to see him."

The guard who had spoken previously hissed with anger. "Three thingsss, human. The first is that you will address him as your king, the second is that no one sees him, and the third is that you are in no position to be demanding anything, especially if you care about the companion that you brought with you." The guard paused for a long moment, eying him sharply. "Understood?" it asked.

"I understand," Grayskull replied. "But only because I want no harm to come to her."

The Snake Man scoffed as it turned away from him and began to walk away. "You humansss are so weak. It's pathetic." The guard stopped at the end of the hall and joined several others who appeared to be remaining there, as extra insurance that Grayskull would not seek to escape. Their presence was of little importance. With Veena in danger, Grayskull could do very little except maintain

his patience until their serpentine King decided to show himself, and he would. Grayskull was sure of it. He just wondered how long he would have to wait.

13.

THE ARENA

Grayskull awoke on the cold floor of his cell, the dirt sticking to his skin as he sat upright. It had been three days since his arrival, the sunlight which filled the hallway his only means of keeping time from within his windowless cell. He'd been given two meals a day, each of them nothing more than stale bread and dirty water. Thankfully the power of Zoar that flowed through him gave him strength despite his hunger. He'd spent the first day waiting to be brought before Hiss, but it had never happened. The second he'd spent worrying about Veena and his friends back in Talok City. What had become of them? The Council of Elders had entrusted Grayskull with this private mission, but would they be so bold as to free his friends, or would that be too brazen? Too much of an open affront to King Hiss? Were they still sitting in their own cells back in that place? Veena, his guards had claimed, was still safe so long as Grayskull didn't make any attempt at escape. He knew that the Snake Men could not be trusted, but he wouldn't risk her well-being in any case, and so he remained where he was, silently waiting. The third day is when the anger set in. Hiss had hoped for despair, surely, but that was an emotion as alien to Grayskull these days as any other that would cause him to lose his way. He'd spent far too long feeling abandoned by the Goddess. Here and now however, she had sent him many a friend, fine warriors all and, in Veena, something more.

All was going according to Zoar's plan. He would not give into despair again. The anger he felt was righteous and soon enough would be unleashed upon those who deserved it; who had earned it.

Just as the thought had passed, Grayskull noticed a commotion brewing outside. If he wasn't mistaken, he would swear that it bore the sound of a large crowd. He'd been so lost in thought that he'd not heard it before. It was then that he realized why he'd been made to wait. Hiss had given his followers a chance to travel to the city and assemble in the hope of humiliating Grayskull in front of them all. He wondered what type of spectacle Hiss had in mind. Grayskull chuckled to himself as several guards came for him, unlocking the door to his cell and sliding it open. If Hiss had expected an exhausted and weary foe, he'd clearly underestimated Grayskull's resolve.

"You are to come with usss," one of the guards said.

"I gathered as much," Grayskull replied. "Lead the way, then." Knowing that Grayskull wouldn't risk any harm coming to Veena, the guards didn't bother shackling him, instead clustering around him, weapons at the ready. They lead him out of the squat building that had held him for the past three days and out into the streets of Slave City. A crowd of Snake Men and Snake Women had gathered in the streets to meet him, cursing him and throwing detritus at him as he passed. To them, Hiss was a conquering hero, Grayskull the wandering vagabond who had attacked them time and time again over the years. To Hiss's people, Grayskull was perceived as a coward, for that is the picture that their king had painted of him. Soon enough, they would learn differently. He just had to remain faithful that Zoar would see him through the obstacles which gathered before him.

His escorts walked him the long way around the arena to make sure that all the loyal citizens of Slave City, those who were the worst of the Snake Men's lot, saw him and had the opportunity to shout obscenities at him. Their words did not faze him, for he had his end goal within sight, and he was in a better position than Hiss or anyone else would admit. Once they'd reached the open archway that led into the heart of the arena, the guards directed him through it. To either side were passages that led to the seats that surrounded it, but he was led down to the lower level that made up the arena floor itself. Once he'd reached the center of the large circle, the guards left him, sealing the entrance to the arena floor and locking it behind them. Grayskull now stood alone in the center of the mass of his enemies, awaiting his fate.

A loud cheer erupted as King Hiss himself walked out onto a balcony that overlooked the killing floor. The crowd chanted his name as if he were a living god,

and to them he was in many ways, Grayskull knew. Hiss had made it clear that he'd been chosen by Serpos to lead. Grayskull now knew that Serpos had nothing to do with it, but Hiss's people were convinced and that was all that mattered. Next to Hiss stood his general, Rattlor. The beast's arm had now fully grown back, though the scales that covered it were lighter in color than the rest of him. The new scales were still young and fragile. As the roar of the crowd showed no sign of stopping, the king raised his hands, commanding silence. He was still disguised in his human garb, which Grayskull found surprising. Surely, he was safe here, among his own people. The choice to remain in his human form was odd, Grayskull thought.

He put the thought in the back of his mind when, with an authoritative voice, the king began to speak. "Welcome, my brothers and sisters!" Hiss shouted, the acoustics of the structure carrying his voice to even the farthest corners. "You see before you, the enemy. D'Vann Grayskull was once a slave, like those other humans whom you clothe and care for and, much like some of them, an unsettlingly growing number, I admit, he did not see my benevolence, our benevolence. In fact, he insulted our hospitality by running away, like a rat!" The roar of the crowd renewed, and Hiss silenced it once more. "But we always catch our prey. While it is true that it is not this man's fault that he was born of a lower species, he must learn his place in the world, lest others like him rise up and upset the balance our lord Serpos has set."

"Kill him then, my king!" a voice from the crowd shouted.

Hiss smiled coldly. "In time. But first, as Grayskull will serve as a lesson for those slaves who wish to revolt, who wish to turn up their noses at the opportunities that we give them, one of you will act as another lesson altogether. One of you will serve as a lesson of what happens to those who would fail their king." A quiet murmur spread through the crowd, wondering the meaning of their king's words. They got their answer when, with a gesture, a swarm of guards rushed Rattlor, tossing the general from the balcony to the dirt floor below, where he landed with a violent thud.

The fall would have killed a human, but Rattlor raised up on a knee before standing fully. He looked up at his king with fury in his reptilian eyes. "What is the meaning of thisss?" Rattlor demanded.

"What is there to explain?" Hiss asked. "I commanded you to kill Grayskull and you failed. Now is the time for you to make up for it; one final chance to destroy him. Do it, and you may rejoin me at my side. Fail again, and if Grayskull doesn't kill you, then I will seal your fate myself."

With a ferocious hiss, Rattlor spun and faced Grayskull. It wasn't the serpent that Grayskull wanted to kill the most, but the world would surely be better off without him. Spreading his arms wide, Grayskull, still stripped nearly bare, with no weapons in sight, gladly accepted the challenge. "No use crying over it, General," he taunted. "We may as well finish this."

"I'll finish you!" Rattlor shouted as he rushed the man, his talons coming dangerously close to Grayskull as the warrior ducked and rolled to the right.

"You'll have to manage to strike me first," Grayskull retorted as he nimbly sprang to his feet. The crowd erupted with laughter, despite their allegiance, the sound of which angered the general even more. Rattlor hissed violently, tongue flicking the air, his massive tail slapping the ground aggressively. Without a word, he rushed the human again, and again Grayskull narrowly managed to avoid the blow, this time leaping over the general's tail as the serpent attempted to take out his legs. Rattlor roared in anger when he missed, quickly lashing his heavy tail at Grayskull once again. This time, the warrior wrapped both arms around the appendage and began to turn with such speed that, aided by the power of Zoar, he lifted the Snake Man off his feet and, after spinning fully around several times, hurled him into the side wall of the arena, just a dozen feet or so below the spectators. Rattlor collided into the wall with such an impact that it cracked. Several members of the crowd grew wide-eyed at the sight of a human with such strength.

Grunting, Rattlor once again gained his footing. "You may be ssstrong, you may be fast, but you are human filth and alwaysss will be."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Grayskull replied, spreading his arms wide a second time. "Try to actually land a blow this time." Rattlor glanced up at his king, who merely gave that cold, emotionless smile of his. With another primal scream, the serpentine general once again launched himself at Grayskull, tagging him with a blow from his tail that the man failed to block, the impact of which sent Grayskull flying into the adjacent wall, which also cracked as he slammed into it. Rattlor had regained a bit of his pride by mirroring Grayskull's feat of strength. Shaking off the effects of the strike, Grayskull stood, raising his right hand to move the hair out of his eyes. When his vision cleared, he saw that Rattlor was already upon him, throwing him hard to the dirt floor, which kicked up a cloud of dust as he landed.

Rattlor rained blows upon Grayskull until blood trickled from a split in the man's lower lip. "So, you do bleed," Rattlor said, loud enough for the crowd to hear. "Prepare to bleed much more!" he shouted, the arena cheering in response as their general clasped his clawed hands high in preparation for a clubbing blow. Before

he could attack again, Grayskull balled his right hand into a tight fist and struck Rattlor directly under the jaw, knocking the Snake Man backward and off of him. The beast rolled himself over onto his hands and knees, but Grayskull quickly leapt up and atop of him before he could stand, wrapping his right arm around the beast's neck and grabbing it with his left in a chokehold stronger than any Rattlor had ever felt, much less from a human.

The brutish general managed to struggle to his feet with Grayskull still riding upon his back. Wrapping his legs around the snake's abdomen, Grayskull applied even more pressure as the reptilian creature stumbled about before falling to his knees and ultimately collapsing to the ground on his stomach as he lost consciousness. With a final jerk of his powerful arms, Grayskull snapped the beast's neck, the sickly crack echoing throughout the arena as the crowd fell silent in shock. Grayskull unwrapped himself from the general's body and stood upright once more. He flung his long hair over his back and groaned. His breathing was labored, a result of his lack of food in harsh alliance with the feeling of exhaustion the battle had brought upon him. "Try growing that back," he said with a grunt as he stumbled, falling back to the ground. Slowly, he raised himself up again and faced Hiss, who still stood high on his balcony. "Why not come down here and try to finish me yourself?" he shouted. The crowd let out a collective gasp.

Hiss's smile, which he'd worn throughout the battle, had faded. "Perhaps. In due time." He clapped and the gate behind Grayskull opened, four guards dragging Veena inside of it and throwing her down violently to the earthen floor. She regained her footing and stood, rushing away from her captors toward Grayskull.

"Are you alright?" he asked her.

"For now," she said. "It is good to see that you are still alive, despite the circumstances."

"I feel the same," Grayskull replied, and he meant it. She was safest here with him than anywhere else. He damned his own thoughts as the guards then rolled two cages out to the center of the arena. Each cage contained a griffin, both large enough and ferocious enough to kill a dozen men. With two, even Grayskull would be challenged, especially if he also had to keep Veena safe.

"I promised you that no harm would come to her, so long as you obeyed me," Hiss said. "I lied, of course. It is time for you to be broken. Irreparably. Will Zoar save you, Priestess, or will you die like so many others she has ignored?" With another clap of his hands, he shouted "release them!" and the crowd rejoiced as the guards opened the cages simultaneously, releasing the griffins onto the killing

floor. Three of the guards were killed by the escaping griffins immediately, their razor-sharp beaks tearing into the Snake Men's scaly flesh in an effort to quell their hunger. The fourth guard ran for his life, making it a quarter of the way toward the exit before the leftmost griffin pounced and sliced the Snake Man in half with its powerful back talons. The crowd erupted at the sight of the gore that they'd come to see. For all its violence, Grayskull's battle with Rattlor had been fairly bloodless, and the crowd was quickly growing impatient at the lack of spectacle. Judging from the volume of their cheers, the griffins were a most welcome sight.

"Get behind me," Grayskull shouted to Veena as he faced the beasts, which were now focused purely on them. As she did so, he caught a better look at the griffins and pitied them, seeing that their wings were chained down to their sides to prevent their escape. Griffins were by no means peaceful animals, but it was uncommon for them to attack humanoids without provocation. The chains, along with their highly aggressive behavior told Grayskull that these animals had been severely abused by Hiss's men in an effort to make them even more dangerous, all for the serpents' own entertainment. He wondered how Veena felt about it. As a high priestess for the goddess of all life, he imagined that she felt for these creatures even more than he did. He never had the chance to ask her.

"Look out!" Veena shouted as the griffin on their left attacked suddenly, swiping at them both with its powerful front legs, the sharpened claws jutting out from its lion-like paws missing by mere inches as they lunged backward, landing roughly on the ground.

"You need to run," he told her as they both quickly leapt to their feet. "Get as far away as you can and I'll do my best to keep them occupied." She did as he said without a word, retreating to the rear of the arena as the two griffins paced back and forth, toying with Grayskull as a cat would a mouse, occasionally even attacking each other in their aggravated states. Grayskull balled his hands into fists and prepared for the worst as the griffin on the right lunged at him. He leaped high into the air, the griffin sliding into the dirt below him as he sailed overhead. He landed with a grunt. Both animals then whipped around to face him and, despite the danger he found himself in, he was simply glad that they seemed to be ignoring Veena and focusing on him. The other griffin, now on Grayskull's right, attempted to make the same attack its companion had, diving quickly toward Grayskull, low near the ground. Once again, the warrior leapt into the air, but this time he dropped down hard, slamming feet first into the top of the griffin's head, rendering the creature unconscious with his tremendous strength. He felt no guilt at having destroyed Rattlor, but these creatures were not at fault here. They deserved to be freed, if possible, not killed; at least not maliciously.

He had a feeling that the second griffin wasn't going to make that easy for him. It squawked loudly as it reared up on its hind legs and lunged at him, its clawed front paws narrowly missing Grayskull as he rolled to the left. He wasn't so lucky the second time, as the griffin quickly followed up with a strike that sent Grayskull into a tumble. Blood poured from his chest before the wounds quickly healed due to the blessing of Zoar's power that flowed through him. The crowd saw only the blood, however, and erupted into a roar once again. Angered, he stood and faced the griffin, the beast now circling him, ready to deal what it thought would be a death blow. Before it could strike, Grayskull leapt toward it, fist cocked. As he soared toward the creature, he struck, the impact of his punch sending the griffin down hard; joining the other in unconsciousness.

Glancing down at the motionless bodies of both griffins and his general, with Grayskull standing victorious, King Hiss grunted his annoyance. "Impressive," he said, loud enough for the crowd to hear him. "It seems I will have to find a worthier foe for you. Perhaps tomorrow. Take them back." With a clap of his hands, the gates opened once again and a large group of guards took Veena and the bloodied Grayskull and returned them to their separate cells, the noise of the crowd growing fainter as they began to disperse.

14.

DECEPTION

Grayskull awoke with a start as he heard his cell door opening. Several guards, weapons drawn, motioned for him to get up and follow them. "Back to the arena?" he asked. They remained silent as they lead him not to the arena, but to one of the other buildings that surrounded it. The building itself was rather nondescript, but he felt a sense of dread as he was brought into a throne room and saw Veena already there and in chains, surrounded by several other human slaves. His feeling of dread increased when Hiss entered, sat upon the throne and looked down upon him with contempt. He still bore his human face and once again, Grayskull wondered why.

"I thought it was time we met face-to-face," Hiss said, his voice sounding deceptively like that of a charming human and not the snake that he truly was. "I've had your friend brought here along with some of the other slaves, so that you don't try anything stupid."

Grayskull gritted his teeth as his enemy spoke, for he knew that this could be his only opportunity to assassinate Hiss, Veena or no Veena; slaves or no slaves. He was willing to die for his cause, but was it worth sacrificing their lives

along with his, even to save thousands more? Conflict raged within him as he weighed his personal desire to keep Veena and the others safe against the needs of the rest of the world. Unconvinced that he would be able to voice his understanding in a convincing manner, he merely nodded instead.

"Good," Hiss said. "It'd be a shame to have to kill her."

"Do not worry about me, my love," Veena said. "Zoar will protect me."

Grayskull smiled at her bravery, but it was cut short by the laughter of Hiss. "So, you've found solace in each other? How truly touching," the reptilian despot said, absentmindedly tapping his fingers on the arm of his throne.

"Why am I here?" Grayskull asked.

"I told you, I wanted to meet you," Hiss replied. "I was impressed by your performance in the arena yesterday."

"You enjoyed my killing your general?" Grayskull asked defiantly.

"Actually, yes. Rattlor was weak. He'd already proven that when he failed to kill you, not once, but twice. The end of that particular battle was a foregone conclusion, really. You did me a favor. No, it was your defeating my griffins, rather handedly, I might add, that impressed me. I had to have them slaughtered, of course. I will abide no creature that serves me and fails in its duties." Grayskull clenched his fists tightly as the serpent spoke, angered that this creature had so callously thrown the creatures' lives away. "I don't want you to think me stupid, human," Hiss continued. "I know full-well your desire to see me destroyed. It's the reason I keep this one around," he said, indicating Veena with a nonchalant flick of the wrist, "as I've told you. Still, I'm intrigued by you. You really think that humans are the higher species? You believe that your kind will one day rule this world, instead of the serpent?"

"You snakes are the ones who are wrong in your belief that you're the rightful rulers of this world," Grayskull replied. "I believe that all life is equal in the eyes of Zoar."

Hiss chuckled quietly. "All lives?" he asked. "Even mine?"

"I said the in the eyes of Zoar, not my own," Grayskull replied.

"Ahh, yes, Zoar. Your bird-goddess." Grayskull's eyes narrowed in angry response. Amused, Hiss raised his eyebrows. "Where is your goddess now, Grayskull? Why does she allow me to torture you so? Tell me about the loneliness that must come with being one of her last remaining followers." When Grayskull

remained silent, Hiss pressed on. "No matter. Soon you will learn the truth of Serpos and kneel before me as your rightful king."

"I'll never kneel to you!" Grayskull yelled. Silently praying that Veena would forgive him, Grayskull knocked his guards away and leapt into the air towards Hiss, landing upon the king before the serpent could react. "For Tellus!" he yelled as he wrapped his hands around Hiss's neck and violently jerked it to one side, the vicious snap echoing within in the throne room. He looked deep into the eyes of the king, expecting the creature's camouflage to fail and his serpentine features to reveal themselves, but they did not. He heard laughter from behind him as Veena gasped. Spinning, he saw that she'd been grabbed by one of the human slaves, who held an ornate blade to her throat. None of the guards had moved, despite Grayskull's having killed their king mere seconds before. "What is this?" Grayskull asked, moving closer to Veena and her captor.

"Deception," the slave holding Veena replied. As the man spoke, he drew the blade across her throat, opening it. Blood sprayed forth from the wound, covering Grayskull as the woman he loved dropped to the floor in a moment that felt like an eternity.

"No!" Grayskull shouted as he leapt at the murderer, but the guards were faster, restraining him. Grayskull knew that they would not be able to hold him long, but it was already too late. Veena was dead.

With a sinister smile, the slave closed his eyes. When they reopened, they were green and serpentine. The slave's smile warped and twisted, his canine teeth elongating into fangs. Suddenly, the human disguise exploded outward in a shower of flesh and gore as the real King Hiss revealed his true form; humanoid from the waist down, a writhing mass of snakes from the waist up, the largest of which settled in the center and eyed Grayskull as the other heads slithered about in every direction. It was a thing of nightmares that Grayskull would never have believed existed if someone had tried to describe it to him. "You fool!" the creature hissed. "Did you really think that I would allow myself to be so vulnerable? Did you really believe that you were in control?"

Grayskull dropped to his knees as he saw the woman he'd grown to love lying lifeless on the stone floor, a pool of her blood spreading around her. He knew that he should fight. He knew that this was his opportunity. Instead, he merely stared into Veena's lifeless eyes as he was dragged from the throne room, covered in her blood.

15.

CONFessions

Adam was restless. It had been days since Grayskull and Veena had been removed from their cells and he and his companions had no idea where they'd been taken. They knew that it was Snake Man territory, and that was all. While Grayskull had originally been put in a cell by himself here at the Hall of Elders, Adam and the rest of his companions were placed together, save for Adora, who was in the adjacent cell. Despite their getting along quite well, being kept so close together for so long had about driven the civility out of each and every one of them. Thankfully, after two days, they'd been released. None of the Elders had spoken to them and they'd spent the last day or so trying to formulate some type of plan to locate their lost friends. Adam and Adora felt that Grayskull and Veena had been taken back to the Temple of Serpos, but Gorr the Red had disagreed. Knowing how Hiss operated, Gorr was convinced that the pair had instead been taken to a place called Slave City. The very name sent a shudder through Adam's body. As it was, the six of them now sat in the same tavern in which they'd first met. Gorr had knocked back several large bowls of mead and had a furious look in his eyes. He hated Hiss with a passion, and it took all the effort he could manage to sit here while they tried to decide which direction to head in pursuit. The man rubbed his bald head and stroked his beard annoyedly before finally slamming his fist down on

the table hard enough to startle even his three burly friends. "Aye, this really takes the hiss," he seethed. "Us, sit'n 'ere while our friends are likely eaten whole by those beasts. I've had enough of it."

"What are we supposed to do?" Adora asked. "Just flip a coin to decide which direction to head in?"

Gorr huffed. "Even that'd be preferable to just sit'n 'ere get'n drunk and I have to say, those are words these lads've never heard me say in all our years together." He finished another bowl of mead and cast it aside. "We need to make a decision."

"I agree," Adam replied, "but we can't just rush off in the wrong direction."

"I'm tell'n ye, they've been taken to Slave City," Gorr argued. "Hiss plays with his food first, do ye understand?" he asked. "Th' arena there; I'm sure it's where they've been taken, so he can have a bit 'o fun with 'em before they meet their ends."

"But it makes just as much sense that he'd take Grayskull and Veena to the Temple of Serpos," Adam countered, "since that's where we took Veena from in the first place."

Adora, listening to the conversation without participating, as she felt that both men made valid points, began to feel a vibration against her chest. Looking down, her eyes widened as she realized that the sensation was coming from the amulet that hung around her neck; her gift from the Oracle. He'd told her that it would show her the way. Perhaps this was the moment he'd anticipated? As she took the amulet in her hand, the pink crystal surface began to glow fiercely, accompanying the vibrations with a sense of urgency. "Guys?" she said, sounding confused.

"What is it?" Adam said before seeing the amulet for himself, his eyes focusing on the mysterious gift as it glowed.

"I think it's trying to tell us something," she answered.

Gorr and his companions likewise gazed at the artifact, particularly the Gar sorcerer Kordus. "Where did you get that?" Kordus asked, his voice full of curiosity.

"It was a gift from the Oracle," she replied.

"You've met the Oracle?" Kordus asked, impressed. "No one meets the Oracle."

"Well, we did," Adora said matter-of-factly, "and he gave me this before we left. He said it would show me the way, but I didn't understand what he meant at the time."

Kordus eyed her closely, the sorcerer obviously in awe of the crystal amulet she held in her hand. "He has given you a great gift," he began. "It is made, at least in part, from the Crystal of Allenar, the only crystal like it on this world."

"What does it do?" Adora asked.

"A great many things," Kordus replied. "It acts as a vessel, a container of sorts, for magic. The crystal can be imbued with whatever spell the practitioner wishes. For some, it increases magical powers. For others, it helps them maintain a spell of illusion. For you, it seems, it acts as a compass, guiding you to where you need to be. That is the true gift that the Oracle has given you: a figurative torch to light your way. To guide you."

"Are you saying that it will guide us to Grayskull and Veena?" Adora asked.

"If that is what you seek, then yes," he replied.

"Well then we should step outside and see what happens, aye?" Gorr asked.

Adora nodded as she stood and Adam joined her. He'd quietly chalked up their visit to the Oracle as a loss, but perhaps the old man had had some knowledge of the future after all. Gorr and Kordus stood, Gorr nudging his brother Bash, who merely nodded as he finished his mead, and the group walked outside.

"Can you tell which direction they're in?" Adam asked.

"It's not exactly a compass, but it seems to be vibrating most strongly to the East," she began, "but both the Temple of Serpos and Slave City lie in that direction. I don't suppose we'll truly know until we get closer."

"May as well get a move on, then," Gorr said as he placed his horned helm upon his head. "And it's about damned time, too."

"How will we get there?" Adam asked.

Gorr looked at him and smiled. "Surely not on foot, my friend. I may have a little somethin' we can use. Kordus?"

"Hmmm. Yes. I think I sense something nearby we can use," Kordus said with a nod. He began to recite an ancient spell, aiming his hand at a nearby grassy knoll. "Arise, king of all kingdoms, beast of all beasts. Arise, mightiest of all the

world's creatures, and carry us onward to our fates. By thy bones may we travel, by thy grace may we reach our destination."

Adam shot the sorcerer a look as nothing seemed to happen. "What was that all about?"

"Give him a moment," Kordus replied with a slight grin. "He's been sleeping for a long time."

Just as soon as the man had spoken the words, Adam began to feel the ground rumble beneath their feet. "What's happening?" he asked.

"He's waking up," Kordus said with a sly grin.

The rumble continued until the dirt and grass upon the knoll began to shift, large bones protruding from it like angry spikes. The ground split open with a crack and more bones spewed forth before it closed once more. Soon, the pile of bones began to shake and rattle, moving through some magical force until they became the reassembled skeleton of a gigantic reptilian creature. The skeleton pulled its skull from the ground and began walking toward Adam and his group, its steps pounding the ground as it walked. Surely this was the remains of some type of long-extinct Preternian beast. "What in the worlds?" Adam asked.

"Let's call him Battle Bones," Kordus said with a laugh. "I find the name amusing."

"But," Adam paused, "how does this help us?"

"Bones here will act as transport, large enough to carry all of us," Kordus answered. "Simply climb within his rib-cage and we'll be off."

"I have to say," Adam began, "I've seen a lot of crazy things in my life, but this just may be the most insane."

"Just go with it, brother," Adora said, a mischievous look in her eyes. "At least we won't have to walk."

Adam smiled and shook his head as he, his sister, and the rest of their companions climbed aboard the massive skeleton. "How do you make it go?" he asked naively.

"You ask it nicely," Kordus answered. "Take us East, if you will, my friend." With those words, the skeletal creature began to walk, leaving Talok City and a crowd of scared and confused onlookers behind.

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Grayskull sat motionless in his cell. He'd not been allowed to wash since his arrival in Slave City and that trend continued. He'd attempted to scrub Veena's blood from his flesh, and had had some success, but it mostly just smeared before drying and flaking off. Still, his loincloth had been permanently stained and his hair remained crusty with it. He didn't know how long it had been since her death. It could have been days, it could have been hours. The pain he felt made it feel like seconds. He replayed the scene in his mind repeatedly, trying to find some way that he could have prevented it. In every attempt, he failed. In every attempt, the woman he'd found love with dropped to the ground, a mere sack of flesh, the life force having already left her. He had failed to protect her. Zoar had failed to protect her. What good was a goddess when she couldn't even save her own priestess?

He wrestled with self-doubt and a crisis of faith warred silently within him. Despite his conflict, his outer body remained still. Closing his eyes, he pleaded to his goddess. *Why did you allow this to happen?* he asked. *How could you do this?*

All life ends, he heard a familiar voice say within his mind.

Zoar, he thought. *Why her?* he asked the voice. *Why now?*

Veena will always be with you, Zoar replied.

How? he asked. *How can she be with me now that she is gone?*

She is not gone. Do you not recognize her voice when it speaks to you? "Do you not recognize her face when it is before you?"

Grayskull's eyes shot open as he heard the voice come from outside of him this time. He slammed back against the wall, a chill traveling down his spine as fear seized him. Within his cell stood Veena, alive and well, though she now wore the white and gold armor of the Goddess, along with a golden falcon helm. Even more startling, two magnificent white wings spread wide from her lower back. "How?" he asked.

"Forgive my deception," she pleaded. "You know me in this form as 'Veena,' but you've known me for many long years as Zoar. I have watched over you since you were a young man, struggling to make your way as a slave of Hiss. I helped you to escape, granted you my power. Long have you been of personal interest to

me, D'Vann. Interest enough that I would take human form to know you as a companion, rather than just as a goddess."

Grayskull's heart beat rapidly, sweat formed upon his forehead as he took in her words. "I don't understand. I saw you die." He looked down at his filthy chest. "I wear your blood upon me still. You're telling me it was all a lie?"

Veena looked pained as he spoke the words. "Not a lie, D'Vann. I merely wanted to know you in an authentic way, as a human would know another of their kind. If I'd told you the truth, you never would have loved me."

"For good reason!" he argued. "A man cannot love his goddess. He has no right to."

"D'Vann, I may have withheld my identity from you, but my feelings for you are genuine. Do not fear me now that you see me for what I am. Nothing has changed."

He eased his back from the wall, his heartbeat slowing down to something resembling normalcy once again. "That is easy for you to say. For me, my world has turned upside down." She walked toward him, placing her right hand upon his cheek lovingly. "You died," he said softly as she touched him. "I saw you die. I failed you."

"You may have failed to kill Hiss in that moment, but you did not fail me," she said. "Please do not fear me. I only wish for you to look upon me as you did before; as an equal. As someone who loves you." She kissed him gently and, after a moment of uncertainty, he gave into it, the warmth of her presence a comfort to him, the knowledge that she lived a cause for joy that slowly began to overcome his confusion. She broke off the kiss, but remained close, her hand still upon him. "I became human to learn about love. And I love you, D'Vann Grayskull. I would withstand the pain of a thousand human deaths for the moments we've shared. I understand love and life in a way that I never did as a goddess. You, a human, taught me that. Please do not hate me."

"How could I hate you?" he sighed. "Underneath all of this, are you still the woman I love?"

"I am," she said.

"Then I am yours," he replied, "wholly and forever."

She pulled away and smiled. "You have brought me much joy this day. Do you trust me?" she asked.

"Always."

"Your deliverance from this place is not far off," she said. "You will be king when this is over, D'Vann, as the Council of Elders has said."

"Only if you will be my queen," he countered.

"Of course." She smiled broadly and it likewise brought one to his own, his first since seeing her human form slain. "I would be honored, my love, but before you can become king, we must endure more hardship. A battleground awaits us. We are nearing the end of the Age of Serpos. It is time for the age of Zoar to return. Do not forget, I am with you always." With a flash of light, Veena transformed into her falcon form and flew swiftly out of his cell and the building.

The floor began to rumble, the building shaking due to the quake that seemed to be hitting the city. "What'sss happening?" he heard a guard shout from out in the hallway.

"I don't know, but we'd better ssseel!" another answered.

Grayskull was curious, himself. No longer fearing for Veena's life and simultaneously no longer mourning her death, he felt the strength of Zoar flow through him renewed. Go, he heard Zoar say within his mind. He stood and smashed the wall of his cell outward into the streets of the city. A crowd had gathered and was pointing to the west. The sky was an angry purple. Lightning lit up the dark. With each flash, he saw a shape rising in the distance until it had fully formed, ripped from the ground below. It was a tower, standing near the Temple of Serpos, but so large that he could see it even from this distance. *Behold Viper Tower* he heard Zoar say. *It belongs to Serpos. Two others stand in unison with this one: my own in the West, and the central tower, my brother Havok's, within the Sands of Time. With the arrival of the Three Towers comes the end of this age, D'Vann. Your friends are coming to you. Meet them near the village of Hy-Doe. From there, proceed to Zalesia. Your friend Nikolas will need your aid. He will then help you in return.*

"How will I get to Hy-Doe?" he asked aloud. As he spoke, he heard a rumbling purr as Granger slowly walked out from behind the building and nuzzled him. He rubbed the beast's head and hugged him close.

I've sent you an old friend, Zoar replied.

"Aye, that you have," Grayskull said, overjoyed to see his furry companion once again. After a sloppy lick from the ligor, Grayskull smiled and climbed atop Granger's back. "But I must do something first." Riding back into the city, Grayskull

took advantage of the Snakes' confusion and smashed his way into the various buildings, freeing the slaves within them. The newly freed humans ran in every direction and Grayskull wished he could do more for them, but soon enough they would no longer have to fear Hiss and his Snake Men. He vowed then and there that he would dethrone that snake forever. Riding to the outskirts of the city, Grayskull looked to the distance once more. "Come, Granger. Let us meet our friends, and our destiny." With a shake of his mane, Granger began running at a speed no other creature on this world could match. The feeling of the wind blowing through Grayskull's hair caused him to laugh joyously and he clung tightly to his companion. *What a wonderful thing, he thought, to be free. Soon, with my allies at my side, I will give the gift of freedom to every slave. Hiss will fall and something bright and glorious will rise in his place.*

16.

A PROMISE MADE

Adam and his companions were making better time on the resurrected creature called Battle Bones than he expected and they were more than halfway to their destination by the end of the day. They'd felt a quake earlier, and a tower of some sort had risen in the East. Adam knew that it must be Viper Tower and if it had appeared, it wasn't alone. The Three Towers had arrived. The end of this age was drawing nearer. They pressed on, eager to find their friend. "Is there any indication of which way the amulet is taking us?" Adam asked.

Adora shook her head. "I'm not sure. It had seemed to be leading us toward either the Temple of Serpos or Slave City, but if I'm not mistaken, we've begun drifting further South now, away from both of those locations."

"Is there anything in that direction?" Adam asked of their fellow travelers.

"Not much, other than Zalesia," Gorr replied. "Just a small village by th' name of Hy-Doe."

"Any significance to it?" Adora asked.

"Other than its being our apparent destination, no," the man said.

"How long until we arrive?" Adam asked.

"We should get there around nightfall," Kordus answered. "It is a dangerous place, this village, and full of Serpos worshippers. We will need to tread lightly."

• • •

The group arrived in the village of Hy-Doe just as the sun set. The village was quaint and, considering how deep they were in Snake Man territory, surprisingly human. Gorr explained to Adam and Adora that sites like this often functioned with a single serpentine lord, who maintained control for King Hiss. In the early days, revolt was likely, and more soldiers had been necessary to enforce Hiss's laws, but the human citizens of this area had long ago been indoctrinated to the worship of Serpos, specifically Hiss's version of him. This kept the humans docile, as they viewed the Snake Man as the superior race. Hearing the history of villages like this one, Adam was beginning to understand the challenge that lay ahead for Grayskull once he became king. Even after overthrowing Hiss, many of the humans of this era would still take convincing to follow a king who believed in Zoar.

The villagers stared at them as they arrived upon Battle Bones, obviously terrified by the group's bizarre transportation. As they dismounted the skeleton, Kordus asked it to wait for them outside the village, and away from prying eyes. Gorr the Red walked ahead of the group, heading toward the local tavern. "Always looking for meade," Kordus said with a chuckle, "even at a time like this."

"I can hear ye, ye know," Gorr replied. "And normally ye'd be right, but the girl's amulet has lead us 'ere for a reason. It can't hurt to step inside for a wee bit. Whatever that reason is, surely it will find us."

"I suppose you're right," Kordus said. The two of them entered the tavern followed closely by the silent Val-Or and Gorr's brother Bash who, unlike Val-Or, could talk, but had yet to say much in Adam or Adora's presence. Adam and his sister followed the warriors into the small tavern and felt their eyes widen as they came to rest on a familiar giant of a man already sitting at the bar, albeit not drinking anything. Clad only in a loincloth, the man had no money to pay for a drink. He did, however, appear to be freshly washed, his hair still wet.

"It's about time you arrived," D'Vann said as he turned, a smile spreading wide as he watched them enter.

Gorr rushed to his friend and embraced him. "Grayskull, ye old dog! How'd ye escape?"

Grayskull motioned for them to lower their voices. "Remember where we are, friends." He indicated that they should follow him. "Let's speak outside." Grayskull stood and greeted each of them individually, giving both Adam and Adora a hearty smile and embrace as he made his way to the exit. "My escape was never a problem," he said after they'd gathered near Battle Bones. Here, at the outskirts of the village, they were no longer within earshot. He eyed the group's transportation oddly, but continued surprisingly nonplussed. "We'd been taken to Slave City." Behind Gorr, Bash handed Kordus a jewel in payment of an apparent bet between them over where Grayskull had been kept captive. "What held me there was Veena," he continued, "and my need to protect her. They swore they'd kill her if I tried to escape."

"Speaking of Veena, where is she?" Gorr asked, dread filling his face as he realized what Grayskull's being alone here meant.

"Gone, I'm afraid," Grayskull began, "killed by Hiss. But in death, I now know her truth, as I imagine you two already do." He looked to Adam and Adora.

"We do," Adam replied, his tone regretful. "It wasn't our place to tell you. I'm sorry."

"Fear not, my friend," Grayskull said. "We all follow the will of Zoar."

"Anyone mind explaining?" Gorr asked.

Kordus spoke up first. "Veena was more than just a priestess of Zoar, wasn't she?"

"Yes," Grayskull replied. "Though I'm not sure what more she'd want me to reveal."

"I sensed it," the gar sorcerer said, "but could never put my finger on what exactly it was that was different about her. Are you telling us she's alive?"

"Aye," Grayskull said. "I'm not sure when we'll see her again, but she is in no danger."

"Then that is good news," Gorr said. "Did yer escape have anything to do with th' quake we felt earlier?" he asked. "We saw a great tower rise in the distance."

"In a way," Grayskull replied. "What you felt was actually the emergence of three separate towers; one near the Temple of Serpos called Viper Tower, another in the Sands of Time representing Havok called the Central tower, and Zoar's tower, which lies to the west."

"So, each of th' old gods have their own?" Gorr asked. "What for?"

"According to Zoar, who spoke to me in my mind after Veena's apparent death, the arrival of the Three Towers signals the end of this age and the beginning of the next. One of the three gods will control it. Serpos is ascendant in this age, Zoar the next. We are due for the change. The Age of Serpos has gone on too long, especially this twisted version perpetuated by King Hiss."

"I don't think any one of us would disagree with that," Gorr said to nods and words of agreement from his warrior companions. "I believe we're all a bit sick of things being how they are."

"Then I ask you, my friends, to join me," Grayskull said, "first in getting me some clothes," he said with a laugh, "and then by fighting at my side against Hiss."

"Of course, my friend," Gorr replied. "I will follow ye."

"And we brought your armor," Adora said. "The Snake Men had left it back at the Hall of Elders." At her request, Battle Bones opened its mouth and Grayskull saw that his armor and weapons were stored within its skull. Adora removed his things and handed them to him.

Grayskull nodded in thanks. "I appreciate that," he said, donning his armor once more. "If only the coming battle could be resolved so easily."

"I have to ask ye," Gorr began, "why meet us 'ere, of all places?"

Grayskull shrugged. "This is where Zoar told me to meet you."

"Fair enough," Adam began, "but how did you get here?"

"Ahh, that," Grayskull replied. "I had help from a friend." With a whistle from Grayskull, Granger made his way to them from the shadows of a nearby hut, a low purr in his throat.

Gorr lit up at the sight of his old furry friend, "Granger, ye brute! Still with this blonde barbarian are ye?" With a broad smile, he approached the ligor and embraced the creature around its maned neck. He looked back to Adam and Adora with a slightly embarrassed expression. "It's been a long time since I've seen him," he said as he let go, almost as an excuse.

Adam laughed. "I understand," he said. "I have a giant cat of my own that I imagine I'll be greeting much the same way when I finally arrive home."

Kordus looked at Grayskull and the rest of the group. "So, what's the plan?" the sorcerer asked.

"I'm afraid I don't have one, as yet," Grayskull admitted.

"We need more warriors," Gorr said.

"Aye," Grayskull replied. "I have a feeling I know where to get some. I freed many slaves in my escape, slaves who were familiar with battle in Slave City's arena. They've likely fled to Zalesia."

"That makes sense," Adam said. "It's the closest free city. Nikolas would keep them safe there."

"And he has many warriors of his own," Adora said. "Would the treaty still prevent him from aiding us?"

Grayskull shook his head. "From what I understand, King Hiss has already threatened my friend. He considers the treaty broken. If Powers knows this, he'll take the opportunity to fight, especially since I have the blessing of the Council of Elders, even if that blessing was given in secret."

"Ok," Adam began, "so assuming we have the freed slaves who are able to fight, and the aid of Zalesia, how do we go about dismantling an entire empire?"

"I know how," Bash said. His voice sounded surprisingly gentle for such a brutish looking man. Gorr looked at his brother incredulously. "What?" Bash asked in response. "I can talk."

Gorr laughed. "But you never do."

"I do when something needs to be said. Most of the work will have to be done after Hiss is defeated, but once that's accomplished, here's what we need to do." They all listened intently as he went through his plans for how they would set up the new kingdom, which he'd obviously been ruminating over for much of their journey. When he'd finished, he shrugged. "So, what do you think?"

Grayskull approached the man and embraced him. Breaking it, he smiled brightly. "It's brilliant, my friend. I will be happy to have you at my side when we embark on that journey."

"But first things first," Adora said, "there's Hiss. I assume we leave for Zalesia in the morning?"

"Aye," Grayskull replied. "We'll formulate our plan to dethrone that snake once we've arrived. At least then we'll know what kind of numbers we'll have. Zalesia's not far from here, but we should get some sleep."

* * *

The following morning, they awoke early and made their way to Zalesia on Battle Bones. The city wasn't far east from the village of Hy-Doe and they arrived while the sun was still making its way to its mid-day apex. They dismounted Battle Bones's skeletal remains and made their way to the city gates. Zalesia appeared to be on high-alert, as there were armed guards everywhere, two of them parting the gates for the known friends of the city to enter. The arrival of Grayskull and his companions seemed to bolster the spirits of the Zalesians, who cheered as the group made their way into the city. A guard approached them from the market area and spoke. "D'Vann Grayskull and companions, my master has been expecting you. Please follow me."

They followed the man as requested and he led them to the throne room Grayskull, Adam and Adora had visited in the early days of their journey, but it was now empty. As they entered, Nikolas Powers stepped into the room from a side door, an infant pressed close to his chest, its hair as stark white as that of the man who held her. Adam eyed the child closely. *Could it be?* he wondered.

"I apologize for the chaos, warriors," Powers said as he approached them. "Word is that Hiss and his armies are headed here to attack the city."

"Then it is I who am sorry," Grayskull replied, "that I have brought danger to your doorstep."

Powers shook his head. "It wasn't you, D'Vann. It was me. Part of the treaty I was forced into with Hiss proclaimed that I was not to have any offspring, for any child sired by me would be very powerful, and Hiss perceived that possibility as a direct threat to him." He gazed into the eyes of the child pressed against him. "My

precious daughter was born just months ago. I tried to keep her secret, I didn't even tell you when you were last here, but Hiss suspected that something was amiss when he paid me a visit after your infiltration of the Temple of Serpos. I assume someone in my service was either threatened or paid handsomely to spy for him. Most likely the latter, for even with Zalesia's prosperity, there will always be those for whom it is not enough."

"He seeks to kill your child?" Kordus asked.

"No," Powers said, his voice going cold, "he seeks to kill us all. Every man woman and child in this city."

Powers's hung in the air, enveloped in silence. *What kind of madman would do such a thing over the birth of a child?* Adam thought. "What's her name?" he asked, sure he already knew the answer.

"Evelyn," Powers replied.

Adam approached the ruler of Zalesia and reached out his hands. "May I?" he asked.

"Of course, He-Man," Powers replied with a smile, happy to share his joy despite the looming threat of Hiss's army. He handed his child to Adam, who took her gently into his arms.

Holding her close, Adam looked deep into the child's eyes. Evelyn Powers. Evil-Lyn. She would eventually be sent to Adam's time period to be raised safely, yet alone, save for the spirit of the Faceless One, whom her father was cursed to become. In time, Evelyn would grow to be a great threat, complicit in evils that Adam couldn't fathom, including the theft of his twin sister Adora who, despite possessing this same knowledge, looked upon the child with just as much wonder as he did. This child would come to serve evil, yet Adam also knew the woman Evelyn was deep down, and the ally she would eventually become later on. It was amazing to think that he could know the destiny of such an innocent creature, a mere baby nestled close to his chest, who wanted nothing more than to be cared for and loved.

Adam knew that circumstances beyond her control would make her childhood difficult and she would often make the wrong choices, but fate has an interesting way of intervening. Back home, he now considered her to be more than just an ally, but a friend. Seeing the sparkle of life in the child's eyes, which remained so familiar, even in this form, he began to feel tears welling up in his own as he thought of the future hardships that awaited her; that she was destined to

endure. As she grasped his index finger within her tiny hand, he smiled and whispered softly, "I won't let any harm come to you, Evelyn. I promise." He carefully handed the child back to her father, who smiled warmly as he took her. Surely Nikolas had no idea that Adam and Adora were familiar with who Evelyn would become, but he seemed happy to see someone else fawning over the child he'd had to keep secret for so long.

"The mother?" Adora asked.

Nikolas's eyes flicked away briefly. "She died in childbirth, I'm afraid. Even with all our advances here in Zalesia, we couldn't..." he trailed off, shaking away the painful memory. "I am all that Evelyn has," he finished quietly.

"That's where you're wrong," Adora replied, warmly grasping the man's shoulder. "She has all of us."

Nikolas nodded. "If you've journeyed here from where I suspect, you may be her salvation in the end."

"What are ye talking about?" Gorr asked. "Where did they journey from, Grayskull?"

"I told you," Grayskull said, "they were sent to me by Zoar."

"From the future," Powers said. The group fell silent. "I'm right, aren't I?" he asked. "How far into our future were you born? A hundred years? Three hundred?"

Adam looked to his sister and sighed when she merely shrugged, as if to say, "*What can it hurt at this point?*" He had to agree. "Try a thousand years or so," he answered.

Everyone in the group outside of Adam, Adora and Grayskull gasped. "The Snake Men? Do they still rule?" Powers asked.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you much about our time. It's dangerous for you to know the future," Adam reasoned. "What if you did something different because of that knowledge and changed it?"

"All I want to know is if the Snakes still rule," Nikolas repeated. "I wish to know nothing of my own future."

"No, they don't," Adora said. Adam shot her a look as if she were crazy. She leaned in and whispered into his ear, "We already know that he sends Evelyn to the future to save her from Hiss, so I think it's safe to say he already knew in our past, and if nothing else, it won't affect his actions."

Adam whispered back, "If you say so."

His sister leaned away from him and looked back to Nikolas. "That's really all we can say."

The man nodded. "I understand. Thank you. It is good to know that there is a time when we will be free of the Snake Men."

"Hopefully sooner than you think," Grayskull said. "We'd originally come here for aid. I mean to overthrow Hiss. To destroy him."

Nikolas held Evelyn close with his left arm, and reached toward Grayskull with his right hand. "My friend, we are already your allies to the end. I only hope that you will help us now."

"Of course." Grayskull clasped his friend's hand tight as they shook. "And our victory is assured, for the Power of Zoar now flows inside myself and my two Zoarian companions. More than that, our mutual friends Gorr, Bash, Val-Or, and Kordus have all pledged themselves to the cause, and they are all top-class warriors."

"Then let us prepare for war," Powers said. No sooner had the words escaped his lips than they felt the building shake violently, the sound of the Zalesian citizens panicking outside heard even from where they stood.

"Friends," Gorr began, pulling his dual axes from his belt as his warrior companions drew their own weapons, "it seems th' war has already started."

17.

ASSAULT ON ZALESIA

Alarms blared as Adam and the others exited the Temple of Zalesia and headed straight into the panic and chaos that filled the city. Hiss's army hadn't yet breached the city itself, but his catapults were doing enough damage on their own, sending balls of fire into the buildings around them, setting both the interiors and exteriors ablaze. Kordus had stayed behind with Nikolas, the two men determined to keep young Evelyn safe. Adam looked to his sister as dust and smoke filled the air around them.

"Alright, He-Man," Adora began. "You stay here and help Grayskull and the others defend the city. Deflect as much of that catapult fire as you can and I'll take out the catapults themselves. If Hiss thinks he can take this city, he's going to have to do it up close and personal."

Adam nodded. His sister was the one with the military experience from her time with The Horde and he was more than willing to let her call the shots. As she drew her new sword and began heading in the direction of where the fireballs were coming from, he called after her, "Hey, She-Ra!" She turned back. "Good luck," he

said. With a smile, she turned once more and ran off into battle. Quickly, Adam looked to Gorr the Red. "You and your men ready for this?"

Gorr smiled, axes gripped tightly in his hands. "He-Man, my friend, we live for it. Let 'em come."

• • •

Adora ran hard, the power of Zoar carrying her faster than even the fittest human could manage. *Adora, she heard Zoar say in her mind, repeat these words.* Hearing them, Adora grinned. Her gown-like Starburst armor fluttered in the wind as she called upon Zoar for the first time in her life. "For the honor of Zoar!" she yelled. With a flash, a bolt of lightning leapt from the cloudless sky and struck her, lifting her upward and forging an armored helm to complete her armor. Still running as she landed, she felt even more power surge through her than before and found that she was now amazingly even faster. Apparently, there was still more about their new powers that she and Adam had yet to learn. Granted the power of Zoar alone from the font, she was as powerful as she'd ever been as She-Ra, but had largely remained the same physically. Now, with this added effect, she was something even greater. More than just an empowered Adora, she was truly She-Ra once more. She was a force of nature, and her mission was to destroy those catapults.

Spying the weapons in the near distance, Adora leapt into the sky, nearly flying as her newfound power caused her to soar higher than she ever had in the past. A squadron of Snake Men looked up as they caught sight of her, but shielded their eyes as her cape flared outward, projecting a light equal to that of the sun directly at their stations. Soon enough, she found herself falling toward them, her sword raised high above her head, a battle-cry escaping from her lips as a roar. She cleaved the first catapult in half upon her landing, sending its operator haphazardly into the air as the cables snapped before he crashed back down onto a handful of his allies. Standing slowly, her eyes shot daggers at the serpents as her helm and armor glowed with an almost heavenly light. Her lips lifted into a grin. This was going to be fun.

"A demon!" one of the Snake Men yelled, raising his spear in fear.

She laughed at the thought of herself as a demon, but then many demonize their enemies, especially those who follow other gods. Little did these snakes know that Zoar and Serpos were allies. Hiss and others like him had long ago twisted

the worship of Serpos into something sinister. Adora pitied their ignorance, but couldn't excuse their evil. She raised her weapon once more and, with a flourish, leapt into battle.

• • •

Adam knew that his sister was on her way to deal with the catapults, but the city was not out of danger from them yet. A fireball sailed toward the temple at that very moment. Once again wielding the full power of He-Man, he had little to fear from the projectile. Before it could impact, he launched himself into the air toward it as it descended. He grabbed it in both hands as he soared ever higher, actually redirecting the fireball's course before finally throwing it far into the desert, well out of the way of any innocent bystanders. Landing in a crouch, he looked back to the awed faces of Gorr and his warrior friends. "It's like Grayskull had himself a brother!" Gorr exclaimed.

"Sorry, no relation," Adam lied with a smile. It felt good to feel the power surging through him again. More than that, however, it felt good to be able to save people with his own bare hands and not just with his power as king. Helping others was a large part of what had shaped Adam's character in his youth and on into adulthood, and the loss of that ability, that extra ability to do so as He-Man, explained why he'd felt half-himself ever since losing the Power of Grayskull. He was Adam in heart and mind, but being He-Man had made Adam what he was, bringing him to his full potential. He-Man was as much a part of him at this point as breathing and he felt no shame in being happy to have that power back. Adam looked up, pleased to see that the onslaught from the catapults had ceased. Adora had succeeded. Just as the thought occurred, he saw her running toward them, almost a blur of light. Something was different about her. She was taller, as he'd first seen her near Castle Grayskull, and she now bore the winged helm of She-Ra once more, her armor glowing with dazzling brightness.

Seeing the look upon his face, She-Ra rushed toward him and embraced him with happiness. She spoke near his ear, where the others couldn't hear. "Brother, there is more to our newfound power than we originally thought! I called upon Zoar before the battle and she blessed me with yet another transformation! Even despite the power of the font I already possessed, I was able to become She-Ra once more, with more strength than I've ever had before! Perhaps you can do the same, and become He-Man again?"

"No time to figure that out now," he said as she let go. "We've got company." He pointed behind her and she turned, seeing hundreds of Snake Men rushing the city.

"I didn't see them," she said quietly, ashamed at her error.

"They must have hidden in the sand," Grayskull said as he approached them, riding high atop Granger; a truly magnificent sight. "It's an old trick that they've used against me in the past."

"Well, little do they know what awaits them," She-Ra replied, her spirits quickly picking back up as she eyed her warrior friends and felt reassured by her own awesome might.

"Aye," Gorr said. He, his brother Bash and the warrior Val-Or joined them as he spoke. "Zalesia's army is nearly at our backs and with the likes of ye three at our sides, I almost feel like we don't even need 'em." He adjusted his horned helm and smiled broadly, anticipating the battle, an axe held tightly in each of his hands.

The Snake Men ran full bore into the city, the citizens scattering and fleeing into their homes, abandoning the streets. As they approached Adam and his friends, they stopped in their tracks and hissed violently. Walking to the front of the line, a Snake Man with light green scales and a general's sigil stepped through. He spread his arms to the side and, much to Adam's surprise, they stretched to a great length and whipped through the air violently before retracting back to their normal state. The snake was trying to intimidate them. While Adam had to admit that the sight of the creature was unnerving to him, Grayskull himself seemed unfazed by it. "I see King Hiss has replaced his general," Grayskull said, addressing the newcomer. "What are you called, Snake Man?"

"My name is Sssqueeze," the general replied, "but you will not need to remember that for long. You'll soon be dead."

Grayskull laughed. "We'll see." He turned to his friends and the Zalesian army gathered behind him, whose ranks were now bolstered by many of the slaves Grayskull had freed during his escape from Slave City. Pleased to see that so many were willing to fight with him, Grayskull thrust his battle axe into the air. "For freedom!" he roared.

"In the name of King Hiss!" Sssqueeze screamed in response.

Each army ran toward the other until they clashed in a mass of clanging steel, rattling armor, and spilled blood. Adam found himself fighting against two

Snake Men simultaneously. The Star Sword crackled with energy as he wielded it and flashed with light each time it struck the weapons of his enemies. He took a brief moment to scan the battle for his sister, but he couldn't see her. In fact, he found that he couldn't see any of his allies. He was surrounded by serpents. Taking a step back from the two ahead of him, he saw that a group of Snake Men had purposefully encircled him, weapons ready and gleaming in the desert sun. *Remember that you have the power*, he heard a voice in his mind say. It was Veena. It was the Goddess. *Not just the power of Grayskull*, she continued, *but the power of Zoar*.

Feeling that he understood, Adam raised the Star Sword high in his right hand, habitually mimicking the transformation he'd gone through countless times in the past. "By the power of Zoar!" he shouted. "I have the power!" The Snake Men jumped back in fear as a red lightning bolt shot out from the sky and struck Adam. Instantly, he felt more power flow through him than he ever had before. Much like his sister had again transformed into She-Ra, even without the Sword of Protection, he was now He-Man once more, now in more than just name. In the past, he'd always needed the Sword of Light, his half of Grayskull's Sword of Power, to transform into He-Man. Now, the words themselves seemed to hold the power.

Lowering the Star Sword and transferring it to his left hand, He-Man felt the power of the falcon goddess flowing through his right arm with such intensity that it seemed as if it would burst into flame at any second. Just as he imagined it, it happened, a green flame erupting and surrounding his right fist. The flame didn't burn him, but instead signified the unbridled might of Zoar that now blessed him. It was the fire of the Star Seed that Nikolas Powers had mentioned, back when Adam had received this new armor from him. Adam had managed to tap into it. Turning back to the scaled foes that surrounded him, He-Man's lips raised into a devilish grin. The Snake Men rushed him immediately, and he struck with his flaming right hand, the blow landing with a loud crack of thunder as the Snake Man he'd contacted, along with three more nearest to them, flew wildly into the air. Likewise, he turned and punched one of the Snake Men behind him and that group also scattered with the concussive blast. "By the Goddess," He-Man said under his breath, marveling at his new power.

Now able to see the battlefield more clearly, he caught sight of his sister to his right, gleaming with light as she dispatched the Snake Men around her with ease, her own augmented abilities making her more formidable than ever. She was in fact so fast that He-Man could barely track her movements. To his left was Grayskull, still riding atop his lizard companion Granger, an intimidating sight to Hiss's army. Gorr, Bash and Val-Or were likewise doing well at fending off the Snake Men's attack. Kordus had stayed behind to help protect the infant Evelyn,

and from the look of things, they would be quite safe as the Snake Men hadn't managed to make it as far as the Temple of Zalesia. Now that their catapults had been destroyed by She-Ra, they were forced to fight blade to blade, and they were quickly losing whatever ground they'd gained. The fear had gone out of both the citizens and soldiers of the Zalesian army as they began to see the tide turning in their favor. Before long, the Snake Men would either have to retreat or be decimated. With a sudden impact, He-Man was slammed to the ground, kicking up dust as he skidded along the sand-swept cobblestone roads of the city. He looked up to see his attacker, the new general of King Hiss's army.

Sssqueeze's tongue flicked the air as he hissed, his arms stretching out and lifting He-Man from the ground before he could regain his footing. His sword-arm pinned to his side by Sssqueeze's powerful grip, he reared his right hand back for another thunderous punch only to have Sssqueeze capture it in a vise-like grip. Without warning, he was lifted even higher, the general's arms wrapping around his body several times over, constricting tighter against He-Man's ribcage each time he exhaled. The Snake Man was doing his best to suffocate him as a python would its prey. He held his breath for as long as he could, for each breath out would bring him closer to his doom. Still, he found the pressure growing stronger. Even with the newly enhanced power of Zoar flowing through him, his body still needed oxygen to survive and disobeyed his commands with the occasional gasp, each one allowing the general to tighten his grip even more.

He-Man's lungs felt as if they were on fire. After holding his breath longer than any normal human could, he finally had to let it out fully. As he did so, he felt the Snake Man's arms tightening around him beyond what he thought possible. He tried to breathe in once again, but found that he couldn't; Sssqueeze's arms were now so tight around him that his lungs could no longer expand. He-Man began to panic despite himself. He could feel the blood rushing to his head and began seeing stars as his vision blurred. He fought to close his eyes as a bright light enveloped himself and his foe. Or at least he thought there was a light. He was no longer sure, for all he could see was a white blur. Soon enough, he welcomed the infinite blackness that replaced it, feeling himself fall into its depths as he gave in to its soft comforts, free of everything.

18.

EDGE OF VICTORY

D'Vann Grayskull scanned the battle from atop Granger and smiled. The Zalesian army was doing well and fighting without fear of their enemy. The Snake Men usually thrived on the fear that they inspired. The first step in defeating King Hiss was eliminating that fear in the hearts of Grayskull's allies, and they were well on the way to doing just that. She-Ra had somehow had her powers enhanced by the Goddess to a level that likely surpassed even his. Her brother He-Man had likewise been given a thunderous punch that was decimating his enemies, more so than any thrown from Grayskull ever had. He pitied whatever foe awaited them in their time. D'Vann swung his axe hard as Snake Men rushed toward him and Granger, and his aim proved so true that it was as if Zoar herself were guiding his hand. Perhaps she was, he mused. He had not seen her in her human form of Veena since she'd appeared to him in his Slave City cell, but he believed, no, he knew, that she was with him on the field of battle. He could feel both her presence and her blessing. Granger roared as another wave of serpents approached, albeit more cautiously this time. Once again, the man who would be king struck with his unbreakable axe, slaying his enemies; the enemies of all free men, women and children. It was for them that he fought most of all. When he was a lad, he'd sworn

that he would one day return and free them from captivity, and he intended to do just that.

Glancing to the right he saw He-Man struggling with the new general of Hiss's army. Grayskull began to move in the man's direction before he saw that it was too late. He-Man had fallen. It was in someone else's hands now.

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She-Ra saw her brother fall to the ground in a heap as the light she shone on Sssqueeze from her Starburst armor's cape temporarily blinded the hideous creature. Its arms flailed blindly in an attempt to strike what it could not see, namely her, dropping Adam to the ground in the process. She'd seen the lightning strike that had transformed her brother into He-Man once more, the thunderous cracks that his punches now caused were what brought her to him amidst the chaos of the battle. But even with his newfound power, Sssqueeze had somehow managed to stop him. Now knowing just how dangerous he was, she wouldn't be taking any chances with the Snake Man. Seizing the opportunity presented by Sssqueeze's distraction, she stepped in close, separating the Snake Man's head from his neck with one lightning quick swing of her blade. Her brother wouldn't be happy about it. He believed in the sanctity of all life, even the lives of his enemies, but this was war. She-Ra understood that wars weren't won without bloodshed. If serving under Hordak had taught her anything at all, it was that horrible truth. Eventually, once they'd returned to their own time, she and her brother would have to destroy Hordak once and for all and they couldn't do that without killing him. Although it saddened her to think of her brother having to break his code, in that decisive battle he would have to accept the truth of war as well, or they would all suffer the consequences.

Sheathing her sword, She-Ra knelt next to her brother and tried to coax him awake. He-Man's eyes fluttered open and he sat up with a start, drawing in a deep breath. She wrapped her left arm around his shoulders to steady him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You lost consciousness, brother."

"Sssqueeze," he said with a sudden dread, ready to defend her from his attacker. After a brief survey of the area around him, he saw the corpse of the creature not far from where they rested. As always, she needed no saving. When

he'd realized what had happened, he looked at her in the way that only he could, but she could sense that he understood.

"He was killing you," she said.

Instead of scolding her for killing Sssqueeze as she'd expected, he merely said, "Yes. He was. Thank you." He glanced back at the battle field and saw that many of the Snake Men had scattered, and many more were dead. King Hiss's army had already seemed to fear Grayskull and his warriors. Apparently, the death of their new general, only recently appointed, had been enough to turn the tide and convince them to flee.

She-Ra helped her brother stand, her right arm supporting him, and pointed toward Grayskull, who had spent the entire battle fighting atop Granger, a feat that the people he'd saved would carry with them in song and story for some time to come. "I may have killed the general," she began, "but Grayskull deserves the glory. Can you see the awe and reverence in their eyes?" she asked, referring to both the Zalesian people and Gorr and his warriors. Grayskull raised his axe and the army cheered in triumph.

"They look upon him as if he were already their king," he replied.

She nodded in agreement. "A good sign for us, being that that's our mission. Perhaps we'll be able to return home sooner rather than later."

"We still need to help him defeat Hiss," he reasoned.

"Yes, but with the support he's commanding, and the people's realization that they might soon be free from Hiss's rule, he may not need us much longer," she replied.

"Do you think he'll attack Hiss directly now?" He-Man asked, finding his footing as she let him go.

"I think it's a wise tactic, yes," she answered. "We shouldn't give Hiss time to recover from this loss."

"I agree," he replied. The two of them walked toward Grayskull, who dismounted his liger companion as the last of the Snake Men fled into the desert.

Seeing He-Man and She-Ra approaching, Grayskull embraced them both warmly. "A battle well-fought!" he exclaimed.

"A battle that should serve as a powerful lesson to both Hiss and the people of the world," She-Ra replied, "in which both have learned that the king can be beaten."

"Aye," he said, "and I am feeling more than ready to teach him that lesson again and again, my friend."

"We've not won yet, though," Gorr said, standing to Grayskull's left.

"You're right," Grayskull replied, "but we stand at the edge of victory. We need only press further, and quickly, to take it once and for all."

"Grayskull!" they heard Nikolas shout as he exited the temple, Evelyn held close to his chest, safe and sound. "That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!" He stopped and took in the sight of them all: Grayskull, Val-Or, Bash, Gorr, He-Man and She-Ra, who were all soon joined by Kordus who had graciously stayed with Nikolas and his child. "Each of you is amazing in your own right. I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"There are no thanks needed," Grayskull responded with a smile. "I'm now more determined than ever to dethrone that mad serpent."

"The lands will finally be united," Nikolas said. "I will gladly bow to you as my new king when that day comes."

"All hail King Grayskull!" Gorr shouted.

"ALL HAIL KING GRAYSKULL!" the Zalesian army yelled in unison. The people here were ready for a change. Soon enough, the rest of the world would be as well.

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Across the desert, King Hiss sat upon his throne in Slave City. How had things gotten so far out of his control? "Grayskull," he said, the word sounding like a curse as he spoke it. "Grayskull is the key. I should have killed him when I had the chance, just as I did his woman. I underestimated him." A lone figure standing at the base of the throne listened silently. Hiss stirred in his seat, the mass of snakes that formed his torso slithering about restlessly, multiple tongues flicking at the air around him. "I can smell fear, you know," he said. "You may as well get on with it. What have you to report?"

"My King," the figure began, "I'm afraid I have grave news." The speaker's voice sounded like a wet croak. He was large and broad-shouldered, but his skin glistened in the soft light of the torches. He was no ordinary Snake Man, but rather a member of an amphibious subspecies, related to them, but different nonetheless. This particular subspecies was not held in high favor among the superior Snake Men. For this one, Hiss had made an exception. He'd earned his respect in battle.

"Out with it, then," Hiss commanded.

"Word has reached us that the assault on the city of Zalesia has failed," the figure began, noticeably nervous. "Grayskull and his warriors have not only defended the city with few casualties on their side, but they have also killed General Sssqueeze."

"What warriors?" Hiss asked. "The ones I saw him with at the Temple of the Elders? That ragtag group defeated my new general? My men?"

"Yes, Master," the creature responded. "It would seem that drinking from the font has given at least two of his comrades great strength, perhaps equal to his own, and then they somehow gained even more power in the midst of battle. The other warriors that joined him have also shown their worth."

"It couldn't have been them alone," Hiss reasoned. "I suppose Nikolas Powers has finally betrayed me openly?"

"Yes, Your Eminence, the Zalesian army is now with Grayskull."

Hiss writhed in anger, a momentary sign of his internal fury, before calming himself outwardly once more. "It was ill fortune, I suppose, that Grayskull and his cronies would be in Zalesia when I tried to take it. Nikolas's child is still marked for death, make no mistake of that. When the time comes, I will not only kill the citizens of his city, including Powers and his daughter, but I will destroy Zalesia so utterly that it will be lost to the Sands of Time forever. Powers himself will be cursed to watch over its ruins for all eternity, knowing that the blood of his people is on his own hands. For now, however, our primary concern is Grayskull and his men, is that understood?"

"Yes, My King."

"Surely, he seeks my throne, or another like it. He'll not have it, I promise you that." Hiss remained silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "What news of the Three Towers? Have you any insights as to their purpose?"

"Only rumors."

"Then tell me the rumors," Hiss replied.

"They say that each tower represents a different god; either Serpos, Zoar, or Havok," the creature said.

"Who says this?" Hiss asked.

"The high priests of Serpos, Your Greatness. Those who have left the old path; the one's you haven't killed."

Hiss laughed softly. An otherworldly sound coming from him. "Continue."

"They say that the arrival of the towers signals the end of this age, and that when the winner of this war emerges, the towers will fade."

"Let's see that they fade quickly, then," Hiss said.

"Yes, My Master, but I must ask, will you remain here, or return to your den within the Corridors of Lithos?"

"I will not cower under a rock as our primitive ancestors would have," Hiss said, his tone full of menace. "I will meet Grayskull in the fields of battle with all of my Snake Men at my back. His house will fall before it even forms. You, Tung Lashor, will be my new general. Try to live longer than the last one."

Tung Lashor bowed deeply. "Thank you, Your Excellency. I most humbly accept."

"Do nothing humbly, Tung Lashor, or you will be no more successful than your predecessors," Hiss said. "Now, begin readying my army. My pet will be joining us. Prepare for its release. We march toward this so-called Viper Tower at dawn. There is power there. The power of Serpos. There, we will meet our enemy and when he is out of our way, we will continue on and finish what we started in Zalesia."

19.

THE CALM BEFORE

The Warriors of Grayskull, as they'd begun calling themselves, sat around Nikolas Powers's table in Zalesia, eating and drinking in celebration. The city had had suffered surprisingly few casualties despite the damage caused by the Snake Men's catapults. The initial clean-up of the city had taken two days. With the aid of Grayskull and his companions, He-Man and She-Ra chief among them, the effort had gone smoothly and faster than expected. They'd earned themselves a hearty meal. In time, naturally, the discussion turned to the future. "So, my friend," the sorcerer Kordus began, "your goal is to become king?"

Grayskull placed his goblet of mead down on the table and leaned back in a relaxed state. "My goal is to overthrow King Hiss and restore freedom to those under his dominion. If men wish to bestow a title upon me for it, then so be it."

"So, it is not power you seek?" the Gar asked, more out of curiosity than out of any real doubt.

"I have power enough without a title," Grayskull replied. "Just ask Rattlor and the other Snake Men that serve that monster." The group laughed in response.

"Aye, th' power of Zoar is great indeed," Gorr said. "Yer friends here are proof enough of that. She-Ra stopped that creature Sssqueeze with one swift stroke and He-Man 'ere called down th' very thunder of th' heavens with naught but his fists. I swear, it was the damnedest thing I'd ever seen." He took a swig of mead and slammed it back down on the table. "And by the gods, Grayskull, if ye do overthrow that evil son of an egg, then I'll be the first to call ye 'king' and shall have no problem doin' so."

Grayskull looked to his friend Nikolas and smiled. "Though I love Gorr here, he's always been a bit of a braggart," he laughed. "You, my level-headed friend, what have you to say?"

Nikolas thought for only a moment before answering. "I believe that the people of this world need a king. When Hiss falls, another will rise. It's inevitable. I also think that those same people could do a lot worse than you." He smiled, pausing briefly before continuing with a sincerer tone. "I think that you would be a worthy king. Worthy of the people you serve, even if they are not all worthy of you."

"Forgive my being so bold," He-Man began, "but my sister and I think that it might be best to move against Hiss sooner rather than later. Right now, he's sure to be weakened, having lost yet another general. If we wait too long, he may be able to bolster his forces."

"I agree that we must strike quickly, but you feel that that time is already upon us?" Grayskull asked.

"We think it would be wise," She-Ra replied. "In my past life, before I learned of my brother, I was a creature of war. I lead a great army into, and out of, many battles. I have always had a talent for strategy and, more than that, a gut instinct that few could challenge for its accuracy."

"And this gut instinct says to attack now?" Grayskull asked.

"No," she replied to his surprise. "I'm not sure we're entirely ready. I had hoped that we would gather even more to our cause beyond the Zalesians and the slaves you freed, brave and talented as they are. What my gut is telling me is that if we don't strike first, Hiss will, and soon."

D'Vann smiled. "The Goddess Zoar has sent you and your brother to me, my dear, and I do not for one moment dismiss that mighty gift. If your gut tells you that we should attack now, then that is what we will do."

"Surely after we've slept off all of this mead?" Gorr asked. The group laughed before a knock at the dining room door fixed their attention.

"Enter," Nikolas said.

Upon his invitation, the door opened. A Zalesian guard entered. "Forgive me, master Powers, but I have urgent news."

"Then speak it," Powers replied. "Do not be intimidated by my company," he said with a laugh.

"We sent out a group of sentries earlier today, as per your request, to see if there were any Snake Men still about the area," the guard began, "and I'm afraid the situation is much worse. Hiss has gathered his entire army and appears to have made camp at the base of Viper Tower."

"The tower that just appeared, the one that represents Serpos?" Nikolas asked.

"That's the one, My Lord."

"Do these sentries believe that the Snake Men army will be marching upon the city once more?" Grayskull asked.

"They couldn't say," the guard replied. "They just said that there were nearly two thousand Snakes thereabouts. It is said that the towers have great magical power. Perhaps King Hiss seeks to harness Viper Tower's somehow?"

Grayskull paused for a long moment. "Was there anything else?"

"Yes, My Lord," the guard said, using the title as if Grayskull were already king. "Some good news. Word has also reached us that the Council of Elders has formally endorsed you, and that the army of Talok is on its way here to join our ranks in the fight against Hiss. They should be here by sunrise."

"That is good news indeed," Grayskull replied. "Thank you." The guard bowed and exited, shutting the door behind him once more. Grayskull looked to his friend Gorr and grinned. "Sleep off that mead quickly, old friend. It appears we'll be making that first strike sooner than expected."

"How soon?" Gorr asked.

"As soon as Talok's army arrives. At first light," Grayskull replied.

"Do you think that Talok's army will be enough?" Nikolas asked.

"It will have to be," Grayskull replied. "Besides that, we have my companions here," he said, indicating He-Man and She-Ra. "With them at my side, we have the

blessing of Zoar herself. That's worth more than two thousand men. If only we knew what he wanted with the tower."

"Viper Tower must not fall into Hiss's hands," a voice said from the darkness.

Heads quickly turned in the direction of the voice, disturbed at the fact that they were alone, at least as far as they knew. "Who goes there?" Nikolas demanded.

With his words, Veena stepped out from the shadows and into the torchlight, still in her winged form. "A friend," she said.

Grayskull bolted upright from his chair and rushed to meet her in a long embrace, kissing her boldly despite being with so many others. "My love," he said, "you have returned to me."

Veena smiled. "I never left you, my sweet."

Gorr drunkenly leaned closer to his friend Kordus and whispered, "Does she have wings now, or am I just that drunk?"

"She has wings now," Kordus replied simply.

"Well, alright then," Gorr said.

"I hate to seem so demanding, but may I ask who this is?" Nikolas asked.

"If I am to become a king," Grayskull began, "then Veena will be my queen."

Nikolas stood and bowed gracefully. "Then please forgive my ignorance, My Lady."

Veena motioned for him to rise. "There is nothing to forgive. I have come to warn you all about the tower."

"We know that each tower represents one of the three gods that bind the universe together: Zoar, Serpos, and Havok," He-Man began, "but what is it about Viper Tower that makes it so dangerous?"

"As each god represents a piece of what makes the universe, so do their towers act as a gateway to those things," Veena said. "Zoar Tower can give life and the Central Tower can transform it. Likewise, Viper Tower is a gateway to the web of time, where all timelines eventually meet and intersect, allowing one to travel to any they so choose, so long as they have Serpos's blessing."

"So, with Viper Tower under his control, Hiss could use it to travel through time to say, kill Grayskull's mother before he's born?" She-Ra asked. It was similar in a way to Hordak's plan, she realized. Conquerors always want what they do not have, and so far, no one has conquered time. Apparently, her old enemy and Grayskull's had some things in common.

"Yes," Veena replied. "The tower does act as a gateway of sorts, but finding the correct timeline is near impossible without the help of the gods."

"Would Serpos help them?" He-Man asked.

"I do not believe so, no," she replied. "While Hiss claims to worship Serpos, he has deviated greatly from the ancient teachings, using the serpent god as a tool for fear and nothing more. Serpos may not allow him to access the tower's secrets."

"But," She-Ra interjected, leading Veena to state the conclusion she had suspected already.

"The gods are unpredictable," Veena confirmed.

"If and when Hiss is defeated," He-Man began, "could my sister and I use Viper Tower to return home?"

"If Serpos allows it," Veena answered. "Again, I don't know."

It wasn't the answer He-Man would have preferred, but it seemed to be their best bet. Veena had told them at the start of this journey that they would have to find their own way home and now he understood why. Time was Serpos's purview, not hers. Now that the fluctuations in time that had occurred due to the towers' reemergence were over, she no longer had the ability to help them. Her window had closed. It would now be up to a god He-Man knew little about and had never met to show him and his sister mercy when the time came. "We'll just have to worry about that later," he conceded. "Right now, it sounds like we'd better get some sleep and march in the morning. Grayskull?"

Their ancestor nodded. "Aye. Sleep well, my friends, for tomorrow we bring the age of Serpos to an end."

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Grayskull and Veena lay facing each other, alone in the near-darkness of the chamber that Nikolas had provided for them. He studied every angle of her face in the dim light of the candles that circled the room. "It fills me with joy to see you before me. For a time, I'd thought you were gone forever."

"I will never leave you," she said.

The fact that his goddess had taken human form to better understand humanity was amazing to him in and of itself. That she'd chosen him to share her experience with made his mind swirl to the point that he often found himself trying very hard not to think about it at all. It was almost too much for him to accept. She'd chosen Grayskull to be her champion when he was still a young man and now, finally, she'd returned to tell him exactly how he could serve her. She'd chosen him to end the Age of Serpos and usher in the new Age of Zoar. She'd chosen him to be king. He wasn't sure why she'd picked him, out of the many, many others she could have chosen, but he'd accepted his appointment with immense pride. He knew that, with her to guide him and counsel him, he could be a good king. He gazed deeply into her eyes, only marginally understanding the things that they'd seen, such as the birth of the universe and the creation of life itself, and yet there was something so very kind about them. Kind, and perhaps a bit sad. "You should get some rest, my love," she said, pulling him back into the present.

"Sleep is unlikely to come tonight," he replied, rolling onto his back and staring at the ceiling. "My mind is racing."

"I sense fear in you as well," Veena said.

"Yes," he admitted. "Despite my strength, I fear Serpos. Despite having your blessing and guidance, doubt plagues me over what his reaction will be to my ending his age. Added to that, your choosing me to act as this catalyst is growing increasingly difficult for me to understand, as is your own dedication to me."

"And why is that?" she asked.

"What am I but a man?" Grayskull argued, looking back toward her. "Why would you, a goddess, choose a simple man to do this for you?"

"You are not so simple a man," she said with a smile. Taking his hand into her own, she squeezed it gently, the softness of hers a stark contrast to the rough hands of the warrior that he possessed. "Of all the life on this world, the first world, your fire burns the brightest in my eyes. You ask for reason and logic but my actions are guided by love, therefore reason and logic I cannot give you. You ask why I chose you? Just as mortals have faith in the gods, sometimes the gods must also

have faith in mortals," she paused to kiss him gently on the lips, following it with another shorter one before pulling away, "and I have faith in you, D'Vann Grayskull. Do not fear, my love. I feel that even Serpos is ready for this age to come to its end."

"I don't understand," he said.

"You don't need to," she answered. "While I'm sure King Hiss will fight fang and claw to keep you from succeeding, the end of the Age of Serpos is not just my will, or your will, it is the will of all three of the gods, and even Hiss cannot stop it from happening." She stood up and led him to the chamber's bed. "Now sleep, D'Vann. You will need your strength."

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The following morning, Grayskull met the army of Talok at the city gates. At its forefront was a knight in blue and red armor, a red gem embedded in the chest piece. It was the Gem of Tamadge. Grayskull was well aware of this knight. His name carried great weight in the city of Talok and indeed often found itself on the tongues of warriors around the planet. The man approached him and removed his helmet, which had an elaborate plumage, and tucked it under his left arm. He was ebony-skinned and handsome, his long hair tightly braided and tied back. The knight extended his right hand toward Grayskull, who shook it with a hearty smile.

"Sir Laser Lot, I presume?"

"Sir Atheon, my friend," the knight replied. "The other name I'm not quite fond of."

"My apologies, Sir Atheon," Grayskull said.

"None are needed," the knight said with a smile. "That name has spread far and wide, so I understand. Personally, I believe it was begun as a bit of a joke." They laughed together like old friends despite their only just having met. "I lead the army of Talok City under the auspices of the Council of Elders. They have said that you will be king," Atheon said, "and so you are my king. More than that, I am also aware of you. I believe you will be a good ruler." He smiled mischievously. "Now, now that that's out of the way, what say we kill some Snake Men?"

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Grayskull led his newly acquired armies toward Viper Tower along with his friends. That the latter had taken to calling themselves the "Warriors of Grayskull" amused him, but he was honored to have them take his name. Veena flew gracefully above them. She would watch over them, but was forbidden to participate. Grayskull understood this and her lack of involvement in the battle itself did not cause him to worry. With the Armies of both Zalesia and Talok at his back, they numbered nearly two thousand men; equal to the numbers that Hiss had reportedly gathered at Viper Tower. It was not an advantage, but it was enough. Grayskull had faith that he and his own warriors would win this battle. Afterward, what then? He would not take the throne at Slave City. The very thought repulsed him. Nor would he claim the throne that many claimed was hidden among the Corridors of Lithos. He would not hide from his subjects, but walk among them. No, Grayskull would have to make a new home, a new throne. As he and his armies marched, Grayskull knew that that destiny was within his grasp. It was a destiny no one would have expected from a man born into slavery. Truthfully, it was more of a surprise to him than anyone. He prayed that he was worthy of it.

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He-Man looked ahead from his position upon Battle Bones to take in the sight of Grayskull as they headed to Viper Tower. Already a king in the eyes of those who followed him, He-Man was grateful to see that his earliest assessment of the man had been wrong. He was neither a drunk, nor a man to be ashamed of. He was strong and proud and chosen by the Goddess herself. Perhaps the stories he'd read as a child were not as far from the truth as he'd come to believe. He-Man knew now that D'Vann Grayskull would become exactly the same King that had inspired the hours of imaginary battles which he'd fought as a boy. With that, his thoughts drifted, as they often did, to his son, who waited for him back in the future. Veena had assured him that Dare and his mother Teela were safe, but He-Man also knew that the Horde army orbited the planet, waiting to descend. She told him that he would return home in time to keep them safe. Once again, as he often did, he prayed that she was telling him the truth; that he'd see his family again, safe and sound, and that it would be soon.

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Glancing back at the army behind them, She-Ra frowned. It was not the largest force she'd fought with. Her days as Force Captain of the Horde army were long behind her, but she knew warfare. War was something that one who'd experienced it never forgot, even if they wanted to. The combined armies of Zalesia and Talok were impressive for this time period, but she feared Hiss's power. The serpentine king's warriors followed him with an almost fanatical fervor, believing him to be chosen by Serpos himself. This battle would prove whether or not that were true. She then looked to her brother, who rode Battle Bones opposite of her. As He-Man, Adam looked younger than he ever had in the time she'd known him. With the power of Zoar flowing through him, purer and truer than it ever had before, he practically glowed with vitality. Having glanced upon her own reflection back in Zalesia, she felt that she looked much the same. There was a feeling of power that came from having the blessing of the Goddess that was beyond just the physical transformation. It was a state of mind. It was knowing that you were chosen. Feeling it, she began to understand Grayskull's passion and drive even more.

Adora never been one to worship gods. If her adoptive father Hordak had had any kind of god, surely it had been power, or greed, or perhaps even death itself. Now, having returned to her birth planet of Tellus, she could say that not only did she believe in the gods, but that she had broken bread with one. *Wouldn't that be an interesting conversation to have with Bow and Glimmer one day?* she mused, finding herself missing her friends and not for the first time. She'd enjoyed her time with her brother, getting to know him better in the Age of Serpos than she ever had in their time. Even though she'd spent a year with Adam and his family in Eternos Palace, she'd barely known herself at the time. It wasn't until she'd returned to Etheria, until she became She-Ra for the first time, that she'd come to know her true self. Maybe when this was all over, she would be able to return there and see her friends again. Perhaps then, she'd finally confess her love to her favorite captain. She'd have to make the first move, of course. The man was brave on the sea, but shy on land, it seemed. The thought brought a smile to her face.

She-Ra spent the rest of the trip to Viper Tower thinking about Etheria and the people that called it home. More than just the people, she thought of the horrors inflicted upon them by Hordak and his minions. She thought about how, once this war for Grayskull was won, she'd still have another one waiting for her. By the time she heard the pounding war drums of the Snake Men ahead of them, she was more than ready for a fight.

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Nearly two thousand Snake Men stood at the base of the steps that lead to Viper Tower, the mystical stone structure that represented Serpos himself. He-Man heard the drums, the roars and hisses of the King's serpentine army. Their numbers were almost even, he thought with a smile. He smiled because he realized that although they seemed a balanced match, that balance was a lie, for the Warriors of Grayskull had D'Vann Grayskull himself. Talok's army had his sister and her power as She-Ra and, perhaps most importantly to him personally, Zalesia's army had He-Man. The power of the Goddess flowed through him with renewed vigor. The skies cracked with his very strikes.

He never thought he'd feel that kind of power within himself again. He'd resigned himself to being a good king and a good father, knowing that he would never again be able to play the hero. Now, however, once again knowing the feeling of being He-Man, of being the protector he'd learned to love being, he was ready to return home and protect the planet from Hordak and his Horde army. He was ready to be that hero again. All he had to do was get through this battle alive, and somehow convince Serpos to let him and his sister pass through Viper Tower and return to their own time. As Adam, he would have doubted his ability to make it through this fight. As He-Man, it seemed a minor hurdle. Looking ahead, he saw the army of Snake Men that stood between himself and his reunion with his family, and he knew that their numbers were far too few to prevent him from seeing his wife and son again. If this was all Hiss had to stop him, then he'd be home even sooner than he'd expected.

He-Man gripped the Star Sword within his right hand tightly as he and the other Warriors of Grayskull climbed down from their perches upon Battle Bones. The moment he felt his feet touch the soft desert sand, the loudest shrieking cry he'd ever heard bellowed in the distance. Rising up from the depths of the sands was a towering three-headed serpent, nearly twice the size of Viper Tower itself. Malice was reflected in the six yellow eyes that fixated on Grayskull and his armies. Upon its center head stood King Hiss, looking down upon all of them. Seeing it, He-Man felt a bead of sweat drip down his back. This wasn't going to be the easy victory that he'd predicted. The giant before them was the god Serpos, and he was with Hiss. More than that, he'd been ready to ask for Serpos's blessing in returning home. Now, the closer the serpent god came, the more He-Man feared that he'd be trapped in the past forever. He caught sight of his sister and tried to gauge her own reaction to this possibility, which he was sure had crossed her own mind. Regardless of what she thought, She-Ra continued to walk forward. She remained resolute; a warrior staring ahead with steely resolve, sword in hand. He-Man admired her courage. Willing himself to feel it, his muscles tightened reflexively,

preparing for battle. He would return home. He would see his wife and son again. But first, they had to win this war, which was now a war of the gods.

20.

WAR

"I thought you said that Serpos would welcome the coming of your age?" Grayskull asked Veena, who now flew beside him. The creature, towering above them in hideous, three-headed glory, Hiss riding upon him, was an unexpected player in this battle, one that could turn the tide in the Snake King's favor.

Over the hissing cry of the monstrous manifestation before them, she responded, "I told you not to fear Serpos, my love, and that remains true. That thing before us is not my sibling. It is merely an abomination bred in the depths of Lithos, one which Hiss has convinced his followers to fear as their god. The creation of this creature is an affront to Serpos and will not stand."

"It seems to be standing well enough!" he shouted as the creature swept through the serpentine army on a collision course with his own, the beast's terrible cries causing even the most valiant of his men to tremble.

"Then cut it down!" she yelled, bolstering his confidence before she flew high once more. Now, he just had to win back the confidence of his army.

Raising his battle axe, Grayskull shouted, addressing his warriors. "For Zoar and for the free men and women of the world! For glory and honor! We will not fear this creature; this pretender! All snakes shed their skin! Let us help this one shed its heart!" He brought Granger to a run and rushed toward the towering serpent, slaying any Snake Man that got in their way.

"For the king!" Gorr shouted, running to join his friend.

"For the king!" Bash and the Warriors of Grayskull repeated, following him into battle.

"For the king!" the armies shouted in unison. Their fear was not entirely gone, but with Grayskull already busy cleaving the Snake Men on the front lines, they were eager to join him.

Grayskull rode Granger hard, the liger running fiercely as he swung his axe at the serpentine soldiers. The creature Hiss called Serpos slithered its way toward him, yellow eyes bearing down on him with venomous intent, its master shouting instructions from his perch upon its center head. Without warning, the rightmost of the creature's three heads struck, grabbing Grayskull in its powerful jaws and lifting him high off Granger and into the air. It whipped him back and forth violently before he could attempt an escape. Gripping his axe tightly, he swung with all his might, cutting deep into the creature's eye, which spewed forth a yellowish fluid. With a shriek of pain, the grip of the jaw loosened its hold on Grayskull and he fell to the ground far below. Landing roughly on his back, he looked up to see the creature's right head writhing in pain. As it did so, he could hear the cheers of his army behind him. They'd seen that the creature could be harmed. Perhaps now they understood that this was not truly Serpos, that it could indeed be killed. The fact that they'd ridden to meet Hiss's army even without this knowledge showed just how far they were willing to follow Grayskull and he was again honored to have them with him.

One of the Snake Men surrounding him rushed forward and, regaining his footing, Grayskull stood and swung his axe hard, slicing it in half at the waist. With a hiss and a brief cry, it was over. *Only a thousand or so more*, he thought.

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He-Man, while running to the battle, saw Grayskull fall after the massive blow to Serpos's eye. Perhaps this was not Serpos after all, he realized. It was possible that the myths were wrong about the snake god. This creature that Hiss rode upon

was likely something else, but it still posed a danger. Feeling the power of Zoar flow through him, He-Man wondered if he could take it. Maybe, but he'd have to get to it first. She-Ra gave him a brief smile as she launched herself at the serpentine army with a Valkyrie-like battle cry, her right hand swinging her sword with precision, her left whirling the Staff of Ka, using it to deflect the blows her blade didn't. He-Man likewise held the Star Sword tightly and jumped high into the air, crashing down onto the Snake Men with a righteous fury. He was ready to end this and go home. He was ready to see his family again and nothing would stop him. He and the serpentine soldiers around him stood and he rained thundering blows upon them, green flames once again encircling his right arm. The Star Sword shimmered as he used it to incapacitate the snakes that attacked him. Suddenly, he felt a slimy tongue wrap around his right ankle and flip him high into the air. He crashed down onto the hot desert sands and glanced up at his attacker.

"I saw Grayskull kill Rattlor. I take it that you are the one who killed Sssqueeze?" Tung Lashor said with a croaking voice.

"Actually, it was my sister," He-Man said as he stood.

Tung Lashor laughed. "This is supposed to intimidate me?" he asked. "Maybe I should fight her instead."

He-Man shook his head. "I don't think that's a very good idea," he said. "You wouldn't last long. At least I'll give you a fighting chance."

Tung Lashor's tongue flicked the air and he smiled. "How noble of you."

"Not really," he countered. "The end result will still be you, defeated." As he spoke the words, he rushed the Snake Man and connected with a thunderous punch, which sent the creature flying into the serpents behind him, the loud crack of power satisfying to He-Man as he heard it. He no longer felt any fear. He would win this war which he fought for Grayskull, and then he would win his own against Hordak.

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She-Ra swung her sword in a downward slash, cutting the Snake Man in front of her from shoulder to stomach. War was a bloody, awful thing, and she deplored it. However, it was hard to argue how at home she felt in this environment. Being raised within The Horde, war had been her birthright. She didn't enjoy it; she

wasn't a sadist of any sort; but she was good at it. A second snake rushed her from the right and with another swing of her weapon, she quickly separated its head from its neck. She was, in fact, very good at it.

She looked to her left and saw the massive Serpos creature take out nearly twenty Zalesian soldiers with its tail. It was then that she saw what was upon that tail: Grayskull, trying to make his way upward to King Hiss. Feeling a sense of urgency, she leapt high into the air and soared toward the Serpos monster, using the power of her Starburst armor to blanket it and its master in a blinding light. The monster hissed and whipped its three heads away from her, but the distraction allowed Grayskull to climb ever higher. She landed in a roll and sprang back up, driving her sword into the bright green scales of a Snake Man's stomach. She wondered how the others were faring. The sound of the thunderous cracks of her brother's blows bringing a smile to her face as she realized that they were apparently doing just fine.

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Gorr the Red wiped the blood from his brow with his forearm in the brief moment that he had between Snake soldiers attacking him. He'd taken a hit on the head that had caused his helm to cut into his flesh. It wasn't life-threatening, but the forehead liked to bleed and he needed to keep his vision clear. His brother Bash stood to his right, the sorcerer Kordus to his left. His mute friend Val-Or brought up the rear of their party, his rune-engraved sword separating many a Snake Man from its limbs. They were all doing their part, of course. War was in their blood as much as he sensed it was in that She-Ra woman's. More often than not, he and his friends had fought for coin. They fought now for the hope of a better world. It was the first time any of them could say such a thing. War made one jaded and they'd seen plenty of battles in their lifetimes; had lost plenty of friends and family. At some point in each of their respective journeys, they had lost hope. Now that hope was back, and it was a wondrous thing that felt more alien to Gorr than he would like to admit. He wondered if his friends felt the same.

The giant snake creature called Serpos loomed above the battlefield, but far enough away from Gorr and his group that he wasn't particularly concerned about it, at least not yet. For the moment, he'd have to content himself with carving up the snakes that stood on two legs, and that was good enough for him. With no warning, Gorr heard his brother cry out from his right. He turned in time to see Bash

fall to the ground, a Snake Man's twisted sword plunged deep into his chest, exiting out his back.

"No!!!" Gorr screamed, rushing the Snake Man who'd stabbed his brother and using his twin axes to decapitate it. Bash fell to his side, blood already pouring from his mouth. Gorr scrambled next to him, cradling his baby brother's head in his hands. "Oh, my brother," he whispered. "What 'ave they done?"

"Killed me, most likely," Bash said in a raspy voice before coughing violently.

"Always a joker," Gorr said, "at least when ye feel like talking." He felt tears well up and stream down his face as he looked his brother in the eyes, only the one looking as it did when they were children. The other had been blinded long ago. Within moments, Bash's one good eye appeared to be looking right through him, no longer focused on Gorr at all, but something else.

"I see 'er," Bash said, with a soft gurgle. "I see 'er."

"Who do ye see?" Gorr asked.

"I see my wife, brother," Bash replied. "I see Melisandre." Bash reached his right hand to the sky. "I'm going with 'er now."

"You do that, baby brother. You do that." Slowly, Bash's arm sank to the ground. He closed his eyes and Gorr knew in that moment that his brother was gone. Gorr gently laid Bash's head down into the sands before standing. He picked up his axes once more and gripped them so tightly in his hands that they hurt. He let the pain fuel him. With a roar of anger mixed with anguish, he threw himself back into the fray.

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"Had enough?" He-Man asked.

The amphibious Snake Man who'd identified himself as Tung Lashor stood and shook his head, trying to cast aside the dizziness he felt. "I won't have enough until you're dead, human," he said.

"That doesn't seem to be working out too well for you," He-Man replied, the green fire surrounding his right hand crackling with energy. The Star Sword in his left gleamed in the bright desert sun.

"I'm nothing if not stubborn," Tung Lashor croaked.

He-Man smiled. "I can see that. Still, I'm getting more than a little tired of this, so if you don't mind." He grabbed the frog-like Snake Man's belt in his right hand and, with his enhanced strength, lifted the general high above his head and threw him full-force toward the Serpos creature. Tung Lashor's body struck it in the right head, already injured by Grayskull's earlier attack. The Snake Man would live, but he was out of the fight.

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Grayskull continued climbing up the massive Serpos monster's tail in an effort to reach its master, King Hiss. The creature had pulled him from Granger earlier in the battle and Grayskull could see that his liger companion was doing just fine against the Snake Men on his own. Grayskull knew that this battle would end if he could reach Hiss and figuratively remove the head of the Snake Men army, if not literally. Still, the creature he was trying to ascend was not making it easy for him. The Zalesian and Talokian soldiers repeatedly struck it with spears near its soft belly, but all their actions did was enrage the monster Hiss had created in the depths of Lithos to act as a figurehead for his army; a lie called Serpos that he claimed was a god. Grayskull briefly wondered if he'd ever meet the real Serpos, but decided that knowing one god was probably more than enough. He swung his battle axe high above his head, sinking it into the tough scales of the creature and using it to lift himself higher still. It was slow-going, but he was making progress.

Above him, King Hiss roared commands to the creature, inciting it to attack the soldiers that struck it from below. The Zalesian and Talokian soldiers, mighty though they may have been, were no match for the false Serpos's attacks. Again, Grayskull pulled himself higher with his axe, knowing that the sooner he reached Hiss, the sooner he could end this battle. Suddenly, he saw the body of a Snake Man soaring through the air, crashing violently into to the already injured right head of the Serpos monster. In the distance, he saw He-Man wave to him before continuing his battle with the Snake Men around him. *A mighty throw, my friend*, Grayskull thought. The impact caused the false Serpos to lilt to the side, lowering its three heads near the ground. The effect of this was that the towering creature that Grayskull was having difficulty climbing was now bowed low, presenting him instead with a downward slope. He quickly stood and ran along the creature's scaled back, directly toward King Hiss himself.

Seemingly anticipating his enemy's attack, Hiss turned toward him. Raising his right hand, a traditional snake slithered from a hidden home behind the serpentine king and formed a magical staff, which Hiss then used to fire blast after blast of energy toward Grayskull. Using his axe to deflect the attacks, Grayskull continued his run, finally launching himself directly at his enemy when he was within reach. Wrapping his arms around the Snake King and tackling him, he sent them both off the center head of Hiss's pet, crashing to the desert below amidst the chaos. Wrestling with the Snake Man on the ground, Grayskull managed to knock his enemy's staff aside, which returned to its snake form and slithered off into the battle. Hiss's human-like face grinned, his teeth elongating into vicious fangs, his pupils retracting into the narrow slits of a serpent's. Knowing what was coming, Grayskull leapt off his enemy and faced him, axe held at the ready. Hiss used his human arms to raise himself up to his feet before his entire torso exploded in gory fashion, revealing once more the writhing mass of serpents that was his true, hideous nature.

"Grayskull," the monstrous king hissed. "I toyed with you before, but this time I know better. This time you die."

"We'll see," Grayskull replied, swinging his axe hard at the primary snake that made up Hiss's true form. The wriggling mass merely split into different directions, allowing his axe to pass through harmlessly.

Hiss seethed with anger, multiple snake heads racing toward Grayskull, but unable to land a strike as the man dodged and rolled away. "When this is over, I'll eat you whole," Hiss threatened. "Your power will sustain me for quite some time!"

"Haven't you heard that one shouldn't bite off more than they can chew?" Grayskull asked.

"Who said anything about chewing?" Hiss said, his jaw unhinging and growing large enough to swallow a man whole, just as he'd threatened.

By the Goddess, Grayskull thought, leaping to the side as Hiss lunged for him, fangs dripping with venom.

His primary mouth occupied, Hiss began to speak with multiple voices from his many other heads. "This world is mine!" he cried.

"This world belongs to its people," Grayskull countered, "and they've feared you and your rule for long enough." With a roar, he launched himself toward his foe, slicing horizontally with his axe toward the primary head once more. This time, he anticipated its next maneuver, and when it dodged to the side, he allowed his

axe to pass over it, but quickly reversed direction before Hiss could react, using his great strength to sever the main head from Hiss's body. It landed on the ground and rolled away before Hiss's body staggered and fell with a thud, the remaining mass of snakes still writhing furiously.

"You've not killed me, you fool," Hiss screamed in many voices, "you cannot kill me!"

Grayskull looked around and saw that much of the fighting around him had stopped, the remaining Snake Men looking on in horror as they witnessed the defeat of their king. "Perhaps you're right," he wagered, "I've not killed you. But I have dethroned you." He wiped his long hair from his face and pointed the head of his axe toward the Snake Men around him. "Know this," he yelled, loud enough so that as many Snake Men could hear him as possible, "This pathetic wretch at my feet is no longer king here! He's no longer king anywhere that there is a free man or woman who renounces him!" The Snake Soldiers hissed and bared their fangs, but he didn't fear them. Not anymore. Now, they feared him. "I am king now!" Grayskull yelled. "And anyone, be they human, snake, or any other race that accepts me as such is now under my protection and the protection of Zoar!"

As Veena flew down to meet him, the monstrous Serpos creature grabbed what remained of Hiss in its teeth and carried him off into the distance. Realizing the futility of any continued fighting, the few Snake Men that remained ran after them. Glancing at the chaos of bodies fallen in battle around him, Grayskull dropped his axe to the ground and breathed in deeply. "You have won," Veena said.

"Yes," he agreed, "but not without far too many casualties." Gorr, Kordus and Val-Or rushed to his side from further down the fields of battle along with their newest ally, Sir Atheon. They were soon joined by He-Man and She-Ra, the warriors Zoar had blessed him with. Without their help, he likely never would have even taken on this battle, much less won it. Seeing Gorr without his brother, Grayskull looked around the group, trying to find the missing warrior. "Where is Bash?" he asked. "Where is the king's advisor?" Bash had shared with them his plan of uniting the free world. Grayskull knew that he would need him and men like him at his side in the coming years.

Gorr lowered his head and shook it solemnly. "My brother has joined his wife Melisandre in Th' Everdream."

With a surge of emotion, Grayskull rushed to his friend and embraced him. "I'm sorry, old friend. Truly. He was a good man."

Gorr broke away and looked briefly to Veena before returning his gaze to Grayskull, eyeing him sternly. "Then make his death mean something," he said. "Make sure ye're th' best damned king this world has ever known. A king worthy of my brother's sacrifice. Of all of these men's sacrifices."

Grayskull nodded. "Aye, my friend. Aye."

21.

A PROMISE KEPT

The following morning, once all the wounded had been gathered and were on their way back to Zalesia and Talok City to be treated, Grayskull and his closest warriors sat upon the steps that led into Viper Tower. Granger was having a long bath in the tower's shade. They sat there in silence for some time, collecting their thoughts after the battle, before Grayskull stood, followed by Veena who joined him at his side. He-Man watched his ancestor, now king, look to the group of them and pause a moment before speaking. "My friends, this battle may be won, but I'm afraid the war is far from over. I thank you all for joining with me and believing in me. I wish with all of my heart that you will remain with me."

"Of course we will, ye big idjit," Gorr said. He felt the loss of his brother deeply, but his friendship with Grayskull was nearly as strong.

Grayskull smiled and continued. "He-Man and She-Ra, I thank you for your might, your wisdom, and your friendship. It truly was a blessing that Zoar sent you to me. When you found me, I was but a man drunk on mead in a flea-ridden tavern. Now I am a king. The change I've undergone boggles the mind, and it is largely because of you and your friendship. I only hope that, when you return to whence

you came, you will remember me fondly, and not as the lost man you met when you first arrived."

"You will be remembered well. Even a thousand years from now, your name will be known," He-Man assured him.

"Meeting you has been a pleasure," She-Ra added. "May you have a long rule."

He-Man knew, of course, that that was not to be, but Grayskull would cement his legacy for generations to come despite that fact. "To a long rule," he said.

"A long rule," the Warriors of Grayskull repeated in unison.

"So ye're returning home then?" Gorr asked them.

"We have another war to get back to, I'm afraid," She-Ra replied.

"And people we love," He-Man added.

"Aye, I understand that well enough," Gorr replied.

"There is but one thing I question, Grayskull," Kordus began. "Where do we go from here?"

Grayskull looked off to the West for a long moment before answering. "I don't see myself on Hiss's throne, nor do I expect one in Zalesia. No, I will find my own. Veena has told me of an ancient place, built by the wizard Ro somewhere mid-continent, that protects a great secret. I believe I will make my home there. As king, I will protect that secret, as he once did. More than that, its location will ensure that I am not too far from anyone who needs me."

He-Man and his sister shared knowing looks. *That name again. Ro,* He-Man thought. *What's his connection to us?* He knew that, when this was all over, he'd have a lot of studying to do in his father's library.

"Sounds like we head west then," Kordus replied, interrupting his thoughts.

"Sounds like," Sir Atheon added.

Grayskull looked to Val-Or and Gorr, who each nodded in agreement. "So, what shall we call this kingdom?" he asked the group.

When no one answered, He-Man spoke up. "I have a thought," he said.

"I would be most honored to hear it, He-Man," Grayskull said.

He-Man stood and looked over the lands that surrounded them before pointing to the ground at his feet. "We call this world 'Tellus,'" he began. "It is what our fathers called it and what their fathers called it before them, but I have learned that this is not its true name." He glanced toward Veena who smiled warmly at him, knowing what he was thinking. "It is true that my sister She-Ra and I were sent here by the goddess Zoar to assist Grayskull. I have had the pleasure of speaking with the Goddess on more than one occasion, something that, months ago, I never would have thought possible. In one of these conversations, she revealed to me that Tellus once had a different name, ages ago, before it was lost to time." He looked to Grayskull. "It was called 'Eternia.' It's a name that I think would be more than appropriate for a kingdom that we all hope lasts till the end of time."

"Eternia," Grayskull repeated. "Yes, I like this name very much." He smiled broadly, clapping Adam on the shoulder. "The kingdom of Eternia," he said once more, enjoying the sound of it. "I only wish that you could stay and see it," he said.

"Actually," Veena began, "if Serpos allows it, they are about to return to it."

Grayskull's eyes grew wide with disbelief. "It still exists in your time?" he asked.

He-Man looked to Veena, who nodded in acknowledgment that he could confirm it. "Yes," he replied. "And it's a beautiful place."

"Best be getting back to it then," Grayskull said. He walked with He-Man to She-Ra, who rose from the steps to join them, and Grayskull embraced them both fondly. "Good journey. May the Goddess guide you both."

"Good journey," the twins said in unison as Grayskull broke away.

"I cannot thank you enough," the king said.

"And we you," She-Ra replied. "We now have the power we need to defeat our own enemy."

"Then I am glad for that," Grayskull said. "So, has the Age of Zoar started now?" the man asked, turning to Veena.

"Not yet, I'm afraid," she replied. "You will be tested yet again before that day. For now, the Three Towers remain."

"Luckily for us," He-Man said. "It's time we returned home. I just hope Serpos helps us." He joined his sister as they made their way up the stairs to the entrance of Viper Tower. When they reached the apex, they found that the large wooden door opened on its own, inviting them to enter.

"Wait!" they heard a man cry behind them. They turned to see Nikolas Powers running toward them, his daughter Evelyn cradled in his arms. "Wait, friends!" he called again. Powers nodded to Grayskull and his warriors and thanked them briefly. "I will return," he said, "to thank you properly. First I must do something." He ascended the stairs of Viper Tower and joined He-Man and She-Ra at the top. "Please, friends," he paused, looking in Evelyn's eyes before returning his gaze to them. "I have traveled all this way to ask you, no, to plead with you. You must take my daughter with you, to protect her from danger."

"Your daughter?" He-Man asked. "But Hiss is defeated."

"I have communed with Havok," Powers said continuing in a soft whisper that only the twins could hear, "and I now know as well as you do that Hiss will return to Zalesia and destroy it, and he will curse me. I cannot escape my fate," he said, "but Evelyn can. Please, bring her with you. Havok has told me that this is how it always has been, that you know of her in your time. Please, do this final favor for me, that I might save her."

"Of course we will," She-Ra said without hesitation, taking the baby in her arms. "Perhaps this is how it always happened," she said, turning to her brother as she spoke.

"You don't know how happy this makes me," Powers said, his eyes wet with tears.

"In the future," He-Man began, "Evelyn will be many things, but in the end, she is our friend. We will make sure she goes where she needs to be."

"Thank you," Powers said. "It's strange, I feel as if someday I will see her again." He backed down the steps slowly, rejoining the others. "Good journey, my daughter and my friends. Thank you and may the gods bless you."

"Good journey," She-Ra said, Evelyn held safely in her arms, playing with her flowing blonde hair.

"Good journey," He-Man repeated, and with his words, they turned and entered Viper Tower.

22.

VIPER TOWER

He-Man and She-Ra entered the tower to find themselves within a large chamber filled with light from many windows. Evelyn cooed as She-Ra held her close. She-Ra shivered slightly, feeling a wave of fear wash over her. "What do you think the true Serpos will be like, brother?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he admitted, feeling more than a little apprehensive himself. To their left was a spiral staircase leading both down into the depths of the world, and upward, seemingly endlessly, into the sky. Much like Castle Grayskull, the inside of Viper Tower was much larger than its outside appearance would imply.

"Greetings," they heard a soft voice say from behind them. Turning, they saw a red snake slither from the shadows to the floor near their feet. A flash of light came from the creature, causing He-Man and She-Ra to shield both their eyes and Evelyn's. When they reopened them, a woman stood before them. She very closely resembled Veena, but instead of wearing the falcon armor of Zoar, this woman wore red snake armor, the hood of a cobra making up much of it, extending over her head and chest. Her face emerged from below the armor's fanged mouth. The mysterious woman had green eyes and a surprisingly friendly smile.

"You're Serpos?" She-Ra asked.

"I am known by many names," the woman replied. "The Green Goddess, The Mother of Time, and yes, Serpos, just to name a few."

"And you know why we're here?" He-Man asked.

"Of course," Serpos countered. "Why do you think I opened the door?"

"You're not what I expected," he admitted.

Serpos nodded. "I am not surprised. King Hiss has led many astray from my true path. I'm not all that different from my sister, you know. In the past, I've even had my own heroes, much like Zoar has you now. But I've never been good at maintaining contact with humans. I have too much work to do. Few would recognize me these days. It's simply been too long since they have seen me. All the more reason to bring my age to a close. Perhaps next time, I'll fare better," she said, almost whimsically. "Is my sister well?" she asked. "I've not seen her in more time than you can imagine."

"She's well," He-Man answered. "She is a very kind goddess, whom I'm glad to call my friend."

"Friend?" Serpos asked. "That sounds nice. She has always been more involved with humans than myself or our brother. She loves you."

"And you don't?" She-Ra asked boldly.

Serpos's green eyes fixated on her. "My sister is blessed with being the Goddess of Life. Once life begins, you see, it finds its own way. Time, on the other hand, is work; a never-ending affair. It isn't that I don't care for you because I don't like you," she said. "I simply don't have the time to get to know you. It's ironic, don't you think, that time is a luxury, even to me?" She laughed softly. "I've had to freeze it briefly simply to have this conversation. Soon, I will have to get back to things."

"I'm sorry," She-Ra said. "That sounds like a very lonely existence."

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Serpos replied. "It is just the way of things. Besides, my work keeps me busy, and I don't have much time for loneliness." She began to walk toward the spiral staircase, beckoning them to follow. "Now come, my time with you is short, as I've said." She led them to the staircase and they began to climb. "This staircase leads to any time I wish," she began. "Descend, and you go backward, ascend and you go forward. It's a simplified version of time, you understand, but one that I have created for you to make it easier to understand. Your minds would not be able to comprehend it as it truly is."

"And how is that?" He-Man asked, curious despite her words.

"Time is like an ocean," Serpos replied. "Drops of water making waves upon waves, overlapping and intersecting in infinite configurations. Time is no straight line, you see, but a constant. All times exist simultaneously, as do all possibilities," she explained before pausing, "well, it doesn't matter. Not to you, at any rate. What I am saying is that if you tried to find your way home in that ocean, you would be lost within its depths forever. I thought this would be simpler."

"Thank you," She-Ra said. "It is."

"You've brought the child," Serpos began, "as I knew you would. We will arrive at her destination first. You will leave her on the staircase at that point. After I get you home, I will return and take her to her father, the Faceless One."

He-Man, thinking of the hard life ahead of her, decided to ask Serpos for a favor, "Goddess, is it possible to take Evelyn with us? For my wife Teela and I to raise her and love her in a way that I know she won't be at her destination?"

Serpos stopped on the steps and looked back at him. "A kind thing to ask," she said, "but no. You cannot change the future, He-Man. Things are as they always have been in this timeline. You have always been here, in your past, just as you have always in your own time, just as you have always been here, on these very steps with me. You didn't change the past on this journey, you've merely fulfilled it. Evelyn has an important destiny, and her place is in the ruins of Zalesia with her cursed father. Think of it this way: without her living the life you wish to protect her from, her journal would never have been written, Keldor would still be Skeletor, and your world as you know it would still be split in two. The Swords of Power would remain separate forever. She-Ra would still be Despara and, with the two of you still separated, Hordak's ultimate victory would be assured, killing all life as you know it. What you ask may seem like a noble thing, but it would mean disaster for those you love, for everyone. This is what is best for her, what is best for all of you in the end."

"I couldn't abandon her there without at least asking," he replied solemnly.

"I understand," Serpos said, "but time is constant and infinite. Even the largest waves can start with the smallest of ripples. In order to prevent the undoing of the universe as you know it, you must leave its currents undisturbed." She turned and began climbing once more.

He looked to his sister, who had her finger clasped tightly within Evelyn's tiny hand. "I'm sorry," he said he said to the child.

They climbed for what felt like ages before Serpos stopped. To their left, on the inside wall of the tower staircase, was a window. Within it, Adam could see the ruins of Zalesia much as he'd known them in his time, the Temple of Zalesia the only building remaining intact and not lost to the sands. "We are here," she said. With a wave of her hand, a space in the wall opened, revealing a soft bed. "Leave the child there. She will be safe until I return."

She-Ra did as she asked and she and He-Man both looked at the baby with love in their eyes. "Good journey, Evelyn," She-Ra said. "Until we meet again."

"Good journey," He-Man said softly.

"Come," Serpos said. They followed as she continued up the stairs for several more rotations before stopping. "Time is constant, as I have said. I cannot return you to the same time in which you left. The time you've spent here has passed. There is no getting it back."

"I was promised that my family would still be safe," He-Man said.

"My sister did not want you to worry," Serpos said, "but do not be afraid, your family lives still." She waved her hand and a door appeared in the wall. "You will enter soon, but I must ask She-Ra for something."

"What is it?" she asked.

"The Staff of Ka," Serpos said.

She-Ra reached behind her belt and removed it, handing the staff to the Goddess, who pressed the button on its shaft, returning it to its full size. "I was never fully aware of why it was given to me," She-Ra said.

"So that you could give it to me, that I might give it to the Unnamed One," Serpos replied.

"But I thought the Unnamed One was from the distant past?" He-Man asked.

"He dies there," Serpos said, "but I've yet to meet him." She opened the door, and indicated that the two of them should step through. "Good luck," she said. "My sister will be watching over you."

"Thank you," He-Man said, his sister repeating his words as well.

Serpos simply nodded with a soft smile and motioned for them to continue. Holding hands, the twins stepped into the doorway and felt as if they were in freefall. After a long moment, they landed hard on the ground, briefly blinded with a brilliant

light. The sounds of war were all around them; the echoes of steel clanging against steel, the crack of plasma based weaponry and the agony-filled cries of the dying. Slowly, He-Man felt his eyes adjust to see that he held the Star Sword in his hand, and his sister once again wielded the Sword of Protection, which she brought to her lips and kissed just as she'd promised she would. Taking in their surroundings, He-Man found that dusk was upon them and saw destruction all around. A multitude of Horde Troopers were engaged in all-out war with the combined Eternian and Zalesian forces. They once again stood outside Viper Tower, which was now somehow connected to the both Zoar Tower and the Central Tower, forming a unified temple to the three gods of creation. In that moment, He-Man remembered that the Central Tower, the most prominent of the three, symbolized Havok, the god of chaos. It was appropriate, He-Man realized, as the chaos of the dream that started this whole affair had now come to pass. With no warning, the dark, cloudy sky opened up and heavy rains began to fall upon the desert sands, soaking them. Chaos indeed.

In the near distance, He-Man saw Evelyn and Keldor, no, Skeletor standing atop a sand dune. The skull-faced sorcerer was clad in shining black armor with a helmet upon his head, a black cape whipping about in the violent winds of the storm. Behind them stood a third figure that Adam didn't recognize; a man of pale skin with black hair and a thin beard of the same color. The stranger was clad in armor of his own, black as night with blood red accents, the Horde sigil emblazoned across his chest. Raising a wicked-looking sword in his right hand, Skeletor's empty eye sockets blazed with magical red fire as lightning lit up the darkening sky. Behind him, the pale man raised his own sword in solidarity, a sinister smile forming on his face. "He-Man!" their uncle roared upon seeing them. "Kill them!" he shouted to the Horde Troopers. "Kill them all!"

"No," He-Man said. "Gods, no..." He looked to his sister, a sickening feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. "We're too late," he told her. "Keldor's betrayed us.

END PART II

PART III

THE ULTIMATE BATTLEGROUND

1.

KEEPER OF THE SCROLLS

Teela rose from her seated position within the council chamber as the first member of the Council of Kings arrived. King Keldor of Zalesia strode into the room dressed for battle, complete with his skull-faced helmet, a constant reminder of his former identity as Skeletor. Evelyn was not far behind him, likewise clad in her own royal armor. Glancing in Teela's direction, Keldor quickly looked away, scanning the room. Only when he saw that Teela was alone, aside from Mekaneck, did he address her. "Where is Adam?" he asked pointedly.

"I'm not sure," the queen answered honestly. It had been an entire day since Adam and Adora had entered Castle Grayskull, and they'd yet to return. Teela had no choice but to continue without them. They all did. "During our journey back to Eternia, he was called by a Sorceress of Grayskull back to the site of the castle." The mention of the Sorceress got Evelyn's attention, who raised her eyebrows curiously. "It wasn't the Sorceress we knew," Teela clarified. "It was Veena, the first Sorceress."

"Ridiculous," Keldor replied with a scoff. "She's been dead for centuries."

"Stranger things have been happening lately," Teela argued.

The half-gar king stared at her for a long moment before nodding in agreement. The appearance of the mysterious and legendary Three Towers was the reason the council was convening in the first place. "That they have been. So, what happened?" he asked.

"Adora also arrived, just as we got there," she replied. "She'd used the Cosmic Key to travel here from Etheria. Apparently, the Sorceress Veena had called to her along with Adam."

"So, she summoned both Twins of Power?" Keldor asked. "Curious." Well-aware of the ancient prophecy regarding the twins, he found the news unsettling, though he attempted to not let it show. That news meant that the coming war was even more serious than he'd expected, and he already considered it incredibly important. The gods were the only ones who could have brought back the towers, and now they were meddling in human affairs. That was never a good sign. It also implied that Hordak's gambit was more dangerous than even he realized. Keldor removed his helmet and placed it on the round table that was the centerpiece of the council chamber. The table was a gesture on Adam's part, something to do with his mother. Keldor hardly cared. He'd never been very sentimental. His concern was that the table was, other than the three of them, presently empty. Being here in Eternia with his estranged family was always uncomfortable. As far as he was concerned, the other council members couldn't arrive fast enough.

Teela watched the wheels spin in Keldor's mind and wondered what he was thinking. As Keldor rubbed his temples, the image of him doing so brought to mind his half-brother Randor, but the Eternian queen would never voice as much aloud. Adam's uncle looked weary, she realized. He was trying to hide it, and failing. Teela was unaccustomed to the man showing any weakness. He usually hid it better.

"So, what did this resurrected sorceress have to say?" Keldor asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know," Teela admitted. "She brought Castle Grayskull back somehow and the three of them entered it. She then told me that she would return both Adora and my husband when they were finished, but that was yesterday morning and there's been no word. I have no idea when they'll return."

"This is most unfortunate," Keldor said. "I had hoped to use Adam's influence to convince the Council of the danger that the Three Towers' arrival represents."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Teela replied. "I don't know where they've gone, or when they'll be back. I'm obviously frustrated as well, but there's nothing we can do except hope that they are safe and continue on without them for now." They

had to have been called for a good reason, she knew, but it didn't make the situation any easier. "I'm sure that Adam will return when we need him," she continued. "Both of them will. For now, the Council of Kings will have to settle for our testimony instead."

"But will it be enough?" he asked in a sour tone.

"We all saw the towers, Keldor," Teela countered. "I know that you don't care for me, but we're going to have to work together on this. We have to convince them, even if we drag them to the towers ourselves."

"You are mistaken, Queen Teela," Keldor corrected her. "I actually admire you a great deal. However, you are not a member of this Council. It is they whom I fear will not listen to you."

Teela nodded. "To be quite honest, I share that concern, but I've known many of the Council members since I was a child. I can only hope that they take my word in Adam's absence." She looked to Mekaneck, who stood in the corner near a computer console, uncharacteristically silent. Being around Keldor always made the man uneasy, truce or no truce. "That being said," she continued, "I had similar concerns, so I brought someone in to strengthen our case."

She motioned toward Mekaneck, who nodded in response. He pressed a button on the console and a door on the right wall slid open. A man in a blue hooded cloak emerged, his face hidden in the unnaturally deep shadows that the hood created. "This is the Keeper of the Scrolls, known as Scrollos. During my admittedly brief time as the Sorceress of Grayskull," Teela continued, "I was connected to the power of the castle and shared its memory. Since the power left me, I've forgotten much of it. One of the few things that I remembered was this man."

"I've never heard of him," Keldor said, obviously annoyed at having this stranger's arrival sprung upon him.

Scrollos walked toward the table and looked toward the king of Zalesia. "It's not a habit of mine to be heard of," he said. His voice sounded odd, as if it had been touched by magic to disguise it. There was a sense of mystery to the man that Keldor didn't care for. The council chamber was a sacred place, in some ways, with only a privileged few able to enter. He didn't like the idea of a stranger being there.

"Scrollos worked for the various Sorceresses for much of Castle Grayskull's history," Teela explained. "After the death of her husband, Veena charged him with

keeping detailed accounts of, well, everything, and he was given the means to do so magically. I feared that with the destruction of Grayskull, he'd be gone, but I was able to find and contact him with Mekaneck's help."

"I saw no need to discontinue my mission simply because Castle Grayskull was no more," the hooded historian said. "Without history being recorded, our actions fade away and mean nothing. Veena had a particular interest in not letting that happen and so I was charged with my mission, which I've continued to this day."

"An intriguing fairy tale," Keldor replied, "but even if it's true, I still don't understand why he's here and what purpose he would serve at the meeting. What can a glorified storyteller offer us? I'm afraid I'm missing the point."

"Allow me to answer that," Scrollos said, giving Teela a slight bow out of courtesy when she nodded her approval. The man turned back to Keldor before removing a scroll from the inside of his cloak. "I'm more than a mere storyteller," he began. "This cloak has a bit of magic, you see, a gift from Veena herself. All of my works are contained within it, accessible only to me." He held the scroll up for Keldor to see. "This one pertains to you." The mysterious man unrolled the scroll and began to quote from it. "'I was secretly bitter towards him,' Keldor said, speaking of his brother Randor, '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.'"

Evelyn approached the table and raised her finger at Scrollos, speaking for the first time since they'd arrived. "You don't impress me. Those words were within my journal. There's nothing secret about them, at least not within this family. If you truly have some type of magical knowledge, then tell us something that only we would know, something that you can't just find in a book. Otherwise, with due respect to Teela, how are we to know that you aren't just some charlatan?"

His face unreadable within the darkness of his hood, Scrollos merely nodded. "As you wish." Replacing the first scroll, he soon removed a second before unrolling it and reading aloud. "'I had hoped that you would have learned to accept the consequences of your actions by now, Evelyn,' the Faceless One replied. 'But I can see that there is nothing that I can do to stop you. You must know that by doing this, not only do you kill your own father, but you condemn yourself as well. In taking my power, you will be damned to suffer the same fate as m—'"

"Stop," Evelyn said, cutting him off. "Please. That is a private moment. You are who you say," she conceded.

Scrollos looked up, the motion almost imperceptible. "Are you sure that you don't want them to hear the rest?" he asked. "I love a good story, and it gets even better once Skeletor becomes involved."

"Yes, I'm sure," she said, shaking slightly due to the painful memory. It had been a decision that would haunt her to the end of her days, and perhaps beyond. Regardless, she wouldn't dream of taking it back. If granted a thousand more opportunities to make that choice, she would always make the same sacrifice.

The hooded man stared in her direction for several long moments before rolling up the scroll and replacing it within his cloak. "Very well then."

"That's enough," Keldor said angrily. He glanced toward Evelyn, before leveling his eyes on Scrollos with a coldness that made Teela shiver. "We believe you. But I still fail to understand what you have to offer this council meeting."

The cloaked historian returned his hidden gaze to Keldor. "No living soul knows more about the Three Towers than I do. The last time they stood, I was actually there to witness it. Your goal with this meeting is to galvanize the Council into action, is it not? After I tell them of the war that ended the First Age, each of them will raise their armies alongside yours in preparation of the next."

"And what do you gain from doing this?" Keldor challenged.

"I've spent centuries writing down the history of this world," Scrollos said, "always from the outside looking in; a spectator with no real stake in the very events which I have spent my life transcribing. Veena's spell prevents me from acting directly, but if Hordak wins, not only will all of that history be erased, but it is unlikely that there will be any new events to record. I will have essentially served no purpose at all, my mission for her failed. I may not be able to act directly, but my story can help you in your fight against him," he paused, "if you allow it to."

Keldor paused for a long moment before he spoke, though his tone remained icy. "You may speak at the Council meeting, Scrollos. However, if you ever read aloud from either mine or Evelyn's scrolls again, I'll gut you where you stand."

"I doubt you could," Scrollos replied calmly, "but I understand, nonetheless. I am here to tell the story of the Three Towers and King Grayskull, not to challenge one of his bloodline."

Teela, quietly observing the verbal confrontation, couldn't help but wonder just what that so-called private moment was all about. With Keldor and Evelyn, one never knew.

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Over the next several hours, the other members of the Council of Kings arrived one by one. A few members had changed over the years, but most of the original group remained. Stratos looked a little worse for wear after the Avionian's battle with the extinct turbodactyl species, but he assured Teela that he was well and that his people were safe for the creatures had disappeared as suddenly as they'd mysteriously returned. After a brief series of greetings, the council members each found their places at the circular table. Keldor sat with Evelyn on his right side, with the rest of them continuing around the large table until they ended at Teela, who sat at Keldor's right. "Before we begin," Teela had said as they took their places, "I must inform you that I will be filling in for King Adam. His absence is regretful, but he is on a mission of utmost importance." The announcement ruffled few feathers amongst the members. Upon their various arrivals, she had done her best to explain the situation. Her husband's history as He-Man was not public knowledge, and she didn't want to be too specific in her explanation to the group. However, the few council members who were aware of his secret, namely Stratos and the other Masters whom Adam was close to, were told the truth of his mission for Veena. When the other members accepted that Adam wouldn't be here to attend, she gestured to Keldor. Her guest Scrollos stood with Mekaneck toward the rear of the room, awaiting his time to be called upon.

"Though my nephew usually handles these matters," Keldor began, "in his absence, I will take the lead and officially call this meeting of the Council of Kings to order," he paused. "With the Council's permission, of course," he added, trying as hard as he could to take on an air of humility. The King of Zalesia glanced around the table and was in turn met with nods of approval from each member, a few more reluctant than others. "Good," he said. "Years ago, when this coalition was formed, it was done in the pursuit of peace. More than that however, it was because we all knew that, without that peace, we would never be able to withstand a worldwide threat. We have convened today because Adam and I fear that we face not just one threat, but two." Several of the council members' eyes raised curiously. More than one sat up just a bit straighter. In the years since the council had been formed, there had been skirmishes here and there, and other situations

that threatened a few kingdoms and lands, but there had never before been a threat to the entire planet. Now, hearing that there were two threats simultaneously, some members of the council apparently found it hard to believe. Keldor couldn't help but think that if Adam were here, if the Council saw the two of them working together, that they would be more accepting. Unfortunately, it fell to him, with the help of Adam's queen Teela, to convince them. "The first threat is The Horde, as we've feared it would be. Several of our people have had visions of a great war with Hordak; a war that seemingly engulfed Tellus."

Squiddish Rex, king of the Aquarians, spoke up first. His voice escaped his gilled throat in a gargling wet rasp. "So, you have called us all here, away from our homes, because someone had a dream?" he challenged. Squiddish, once dubbed Mer-Man, had been a servant of Keldor during the Zalesian king's days as Skeletor. Now, the bipedal amphibian was the council member with which Keldor had the most friction, even more so than Adam. More aware of Keldor's past than most, the two of them often butted heads. Skeletor had broken many promises to Squiddish over the years in which they were associated and the Aquarian was not convinced that Keldor had changed beyond his physical appearance. "We Aquarians have little use for dreams or magic. We need something tangible, yes?"

Keldor forced himself to give his fellow member a faint smile. "Of course, and I will provide you with it when I am ready. When it comes to dreams, many cultures believe in their power, but I am not here to defend sorcery or its ties to dreams. That being said, it might behoove you to know that of the two who dreamt of The Horde, one is Evelyn, whose power you are more than familiar with, and the other was King Adam himself, whom each of you trusts with your lives. I wish that he were here to assuage your doubts, but we don't have that luxury. I have no control over that situation, so you will have to trust me in his stead."

"Trust you?" Squiddish asked with a laugh. "I know better. You say you have tangible proof, Sorcerer. Where is it?" the Aquarian demanded. "Why have we left our homes to come here?"

"Because of the second threat that I spoke of. The legendary Three Towers have returned and they signal not only the return of The Horde, but the end of all things as we know them," Keldor answered.

The council chamber suddenly became loud with building murmurs and whispers. Keldor was sure that at least some of the council members had heard of the fabled towers, but it was not the most common legend and a few of them, primarily the younger ones, seemed to be at a bit of a loss.

"It's true," Teela acknowledged. "Keldor and Evelyn have seen them with their own eyes, as have myself, Mekaneck and my husband. In fact, Adam's not being here for this meeting is for that very reason. He's never missed a meeting before, as you know, and would only do so under the direst of circumstances."

"What are these towers then, that we should be so worried about them?" Shun 'Ta, the young chieftess of the Dytherian tribe, asked. The Dytherians hailed from the mountainous regions of the North, far removed from the outside world and they were not always up to date even on the more popular legends of their neighboring cultures. Her question was unsurprising considering that this particular legend was rare, even here. Teela and Mekaneck had themselves been unaware of it before Adam had conveyed to them what the Sorceress had told him years earlier.

"The legend surrounding the towers is an ancient one," Teela answered. "I have to admit that even I am not that familiar with it. To that end, I have invited someone here to inform all of us of their history." She motioned to Scrollos, who stepped forward, his face still magically hidden within his hooded cloak.

"Greetings to you all," Scrollos said.

"Who is this now?" Squiddish Rex demanded, clearly exasperated and annoyed.

"Be calm," Keldor replied. "Let us hear what he has to say." He looked to Scrollos and nodded, indicating to the man that he should continue.

"Thank you," Scrollos said, aware of the many eyes that were now on him, waiting. "For centuries, I have been the scribe of Grayskull," he began. "The very first Sorceress bestowed a bit of her power unto me, granting me long life and a touch of her magic. In the time that I have been in Castle Grayskull's service, it has been my duty to record history. Even after the castle fell years ago, I remained compelled to do so. Queen Teela brought me before you to tell you of the last appearance of the Three Towers, so that you might understand the danger ahead that their arrival signals."

Murmurs and whispers once again broke out among the members of the council. "So, we have traveled here to hear a fairy tale?" King Dakon of Vaderia asked. A childhood friend of Adam's, Dakon was one of the Eternian king's closest allies on the council, though he remained in the dark as to Adam's history as He-Man. Due to this, even he appeared to be annoyed at his old friend's absence and the unusual path this meeting had taken, far afield of its usual business.

Scrollos shook his head calmly. "No fairy tales here, My Lord. Only legends; legends born from truth. You will never truly understand the situation we find ourselves in until you learn the towers' history. In particular, the story of their first and only recorded appearance, and what caused them to vanish. I can tell you of it from first-hand experience, for I was there." He reached into his cloak and removed a scroll, unrolling it before the council. "Within this scroll I have committed the legend of King Grayskull and the Ultimate Battleground that ended the first age; the Age of Serpos. It is imperative that you listen; that you learn his fate and of the Towers' significance."

The council members nodded their approval, some reluctantly, and sat back as Scrollos began to speak, telling them of the ancient battle that had brought about an end to the Age of Serpos and the dawning of the Age of Zoar.

2.

THE FALL

“Hold the line!” King Grayskull shouted to his men, who were currently engaged in an effort to prevent the phalanx of Horde Troopers from breaching the city walls. The Eternian army was stationed all around the capital city. Its construction was finally complete, the ancient fortress now known as Castle Grayskull nestled in its center. They were surrounded, the king’s remaining men now the last defense against the Horde onslaught that pressed in against them from all sides, as a snake squeezed its prey. Grayskull himself sat atop his giant liger companion Granger, known to his people as Battle Lion. The king held his newly forged Sword of Power tightly within his left hand. His blond hair, long and flowing, whipped about in the wind. Firmly holding vigil in front of the massive castle gate, Grayskull perspired from the heat of the bright noonday sun, the rays of which gleamed off his brilliant silver armor, granting him an almost otherworldly presence. He turned as he heard the gate at his back creak in movement. It opened only long enough for Grayskull’s advisor and friend Eldor to pass through before closing once again. The old sorcerer wore a hooded robe, his long white beard in stark contrast to its mahogany brown color. He wore a belt around his waist, its buckle bearing an engraved carving of Havok. As he exited the castle, Eldor drew his hood over his head with his free left hand and Grayskull was sure that the sorcerer was grateful

to have it, as the sun was nearly blinding. Gripped within Eldor's right hand was a magical wooden staff, the Spell Stone of the wizard Ro now perched atop it. The artifact had been found within the castle, and had been a great boon to Grayskull's kingdom.

"My King," Eldor said as he approached. "Word comes from the Dark Hemisphere that Hordak has defeated King Hiss once and for all, banishing him to a timeless void beneath the Temple of Serpos."

Grayskull nodded. "That would explain the sheer numbers of Horde soldiers that bear down upon us, friend. Now that Hordak's war with Hiss is over, and good riddance to that snake, the Horde leader has brought his entire army here to destroy us all. That creature is more of a threat to us than Hiss ever was, and I fear that we are unprepared for him."

Eldor looked up at his king, who appeared more majestic than ever upon his mighty beast. "It is true. Surely no such darkness has threatened the world since the days of Ro. Use his Spell Stone, Sire. End Hordak's evil with its power before he ends us."

"The stone won't be necessary, Eldor." The king held the Sword of Power up and looked deep into his own reflection upon it. "This sword, forged in the fires of the Star Seed itself, will be enough." Guided by his wife Veena, the High Priestess of Zoar, D'Vann had located the Star Seed deep within the bowels of Subternia, protected by the ancient structure which he now called home. Veena's magic had blessed the sword with the seed's power. "The Star Seed was the tool of the Goddess, Eldor. The spark that began life's mighty flame. Hordak, in contrast, brings only death. If there is any weapon designed to expel that monster's darkness, this is this one. It will be more than enough."

"But the Spell Stone—" Eldor repeated before being cut off by Grayskull.

"The Spell Stone is to be sent to your home of Zalesia, to aid them in their time of need," Grayskull commanded. "The abomination Hiss called Serpos may sleep now, frozen in stone upon a faraway mountain, but far too late. Hiss used that creature to destroy nearly all the people of that fair city, finally achieving the chaos my allies and I had stopped previously, years ago. They need the magic of the Spell Stone to save what's left."

"I'm not sure if even the Spell Stone is enough to save the Zalesians, My King. As much as it grieves me to say, I'm afraid that the city is lost."

"True," Grayskull replied. "It may be for nothing. However, Nikolas Powers is one of my closest friends. Without Nikolas's aid, and that of his people, I would not be king. I would never be able to forgive myself if I did not at least attempt to help them, especially after all that Nikolas has sacrificed." As he spoke, the Spell Stone began to glow brightly, catching Grayskull's eye. "What is it?" he asked.

Eldor used his magic to look far into the field of battle. "A dark presence is headed our way, My Liege. It would seem that Hordak himself has joined the fray."

Grayskull nodded gravely before returning his gaze to Eldor. "Good," he replied. "That will make it easier to kill him." Looking out over his city, Grayskull's voice grew somber. "Our destiny is within our grasp, my friend. Let us reach out and take it."

"Yes, Your Majesty. What would you have me do?" Eldor asked.

"Use your magic to send the Spell Stone to Zalesia, and quickly. Afterward, stay here and protect the women and children holed within the castle," Grayskull commanded. "Be sure to also keep an eye on Zoar's tower. Its presence is a boon to us, but each of the three gods has a tower to their name. This battle will answer the question of which of us they have chosen to win this war." The king took a moment to admire the tower, perhaps for the last time. It felt like so long since it had first appeared, along with the Central tower of Havok and Serpos's Viper Tower. Veena had told him then that the towers signaled the end of the age, but they'd remained passive for several years and many of the people had grown complacent of their presence. Only Grayskull and his closest followers still believed, but that was alright. It was a situation he was used to. Zoar's tower meant the most to him personally and from here, he could protect both it and the Star Seed. Grayskull had often wondered if the other two towers hid mysteries, buried deep down in the darkness. He shook the thought away. The Three Towers were vital, true, but there were more pressing matters at hand. "I will focus on Hordak himself," he continued. "With luck, he will never get close to either the castle or the tower."-

"Good journey, My King," Eldor said solemnly.

"Good journey," Grayskull said with a nod. With those words, the warrior king and his liger rode out to meet their enemy in battle. Upon his approach, riding high atop Battle Lion, the Eternian soldiers parted, making a path for their king to pass through on his way to engage the leader of the Horde army. Throughout most of Tellus's kingdoms and cities, their leaders would oversee battles from a distance, using their men as a shield to protect them. Granted unimaginable power from the goddess Zoar, Grayskull was a different kind of ruler altogether, and always lead

the charge personally. A contingent of his men, carefully chosen from his armies, along with the surviving Warriors of Grayskull, broke off from the group that circled the city to follow their king into battle. Though their armies had met again and again, Grayskull and Hordak had yet to cross blades in this formerly three-sided war between themselves and Hiss. He knew in his heart that that would soon change. Hiss was gone. Now, it was just the two of them. He knew in his heart that this would be their final battle. He could feel it.

The hideous creature called Hordak calmly strode toward Eternia's king from within the Horde phalanx. Stepping past the front line, Hordak made himself visible to Grayskull in flesh and blood for the first time. Clad in black armor, the Horde leader's scalloped red cape billowed in the wind behind him. Seeing that Grayskull approached him without fear, Hordak grinned, his pointed teeth glistening in the light of the sun. His gloved hands began to glow a fierce red, the air around them crackling with the power of his magic. Raising his arms, he let loose a fiery blast at Grayskull, causing the Eternian king to leap from his place atop Battle Lion lest he be scorched. The massive cat dropped to its stomach, the blast passing close enough to his head to singe his mane. The beast roared its displeasure before being attacked from both sides by Horde Troopers, who swarmed it. The giant beast used its gargantuan paws to slash at their armor in self-defense.

King Grayskull, still lying on the ground after the near-miss, looked to his faithful companion, but felt that his giant feline friend could handle the Horde Troopers on his own. The king knew that he had to focus on Hordak before the vile creature could advance any further toward the heart of his kingdom. Grayskull brushed his long hair from his eyes and stood, defiantly motioning for Hordak to come to him as he raised his sword. "It's me that you want, Creature," he called to his adversary, "and now you have me."

Hordak chuckled, his red eyes narrowing to slits as he spoke. "I have little interest in you, Grayskull. You're simply an obstacle in my way." The Horde leader raised his hands once more and another blast of fire shot out toward Grayskull. "And I mean to remove you."

Grayskull blocked the attack with his new Sword of Power, which absorbed the blast in a bright green glow until the spell faded. "If not me, then what is your goal, Monster?" He and his enemy walked toward each other at a moderate pace, neither of them wanting to appear hurried, but not wishing to seem apprehensive, either.

"I have learned that there is a great power called the Star Seed hidden here," Hordak answered, confirming Grayskull's fears. Hordak now stood close enough

to Grayskull to touch. Instead, he spoke, continuing his challenge. "It will aid me in the years to come as I grow my army and spread it across the universe."

"I think your darkness has spread far enough already, fiend," Grayskull replied. "It ends here, at the gateway to Eternia, the land of free men. A thousand years hence, they will still speak of your defeat on this day."

"And who will defeat me?" Hordak asked, sneering. "You? You are a simple barbarian king, Grayskull. After your death at my hands you will be nothing more than a footnote in history, uncelebrated and ultimately forgotten while The Horde endures. While I endure."

Grayskull raised the Sword of Power between them and smiled. "This sword, blessed by the goddess Zoar herself, will prove otherwise." Hordak's red eyes widened and Grayskull plunged the weapon toward the monster's neck. The Horde leader merely leaned back, allowing the blade to pass mere inches from his throat. Hordak then leapt back and raised his right hand. As he did so, a sword of black steel appeared in his grasp, emerging from within a wisp of smoke. He sliced the mystical weapon downward, meeting the Eternian king's blade for the first time with a loud clang as Grayskull blocked the blow. In that moment, the Horde attacked with all their forces.

The two titans battled for nearly an hour and while hundreds of soldiers from both armies fell in that time, Hordak and Grayskull fought on, through the city gates and the city itself until the two of them finally stood before the Tower of Zoar. Reaching the tower's closed gate, Hordak ceased his attack, taking a step back to taunt his opponent. "I know the Tower of Zoar guards the Star Seed, Grayskull," Hordak said, confirming the king's fear. "I am nearly there. Soon, with your blood upon my blade, I will enter and take that power as my own."

Grayskull wiped the sweat from his brow and grimaced. "I will not allow that to happen, Hordak. This ends here. You may have gotten this close, but you will go no further."

Hordak bared his fangs, grinning sadistically. "We'll see about that." The Horde leader began to chant in a long-forgotten tongue, calling upon his Horde wraiths, sorcerers from across the cosmos enslaved to Hordak's will. Grayskull looked past the Horde leader to see the three wraiths levitate above different areas of the battlefield and fly slowly toward them, arms spread wide. The wraiths wore sleek black and red armor and long black robes, distinguishing them from the rest of the army which wore the standard bulky gray armor of the common trooper. The wraiths' robes whipped violently in the wind, their faces hidden within the darkness of their hoods. These were the elite sorcerers of The Horde, chosen specifically by

Hordak to carry out his will. Usually, the wraiths were spread across the galaxy, each within different sectors of Horde space. The sight of all three of them within Eternia made Grayskull's blood run cold. His battle with Hordak had been at a stalemate, and the foul creature had just played his trump card.

"You are a fool, Grayskull," Hordak spat. "You think that this war can be won with a simple blade, but it is magic that will bring me my victory. The darkest magic." Hordak stepped back further and spread his arms wide, allowing his sword to turn to dust and blow away on the winds. "Despondos," he said, repeating it over and over in a mantra. Soon, the wraiths joined in, each flying to a different side of the mysterious tower, surrounding it as they chanted the word. "Despondos," the four voices echoed, carrying an unnatural resonance that caused the rest of the warriors on the battlefield, Eternian and Horde alike, to stop fighting and observe. "Despondos." The chant became unnaturally louder and louder.

Grayskull looked toward the sky, where space and time tore itself open, forming a swirling portal, black as pitch. The king had heard of Despondos, warned of it by Eldor. It was a timeless void of darkness and demons. Hordak was more desperate than Grayskull thought, he realized; no longer seeking to kill him, but instead to banish him to another dimension. What Hordak didn't know was that the Sword of Power clutched within Grayskull's hand was no mere blade. It had been forged within the very fires of creation. Hordak was right, this war would be won by magic, but not Hordak's. Hordak's red eyes glistened and rolled back as he continued his mantra, seemingly more and more unaware of his surroundings with each iteration of his chant. The portal whipped the already harsh winds into a frenzy. Grayskull's hair blew back as he rushed his enemy, Sword of Power at the ready. The forces of nature that blew against him would have prevented a normal man from reaching the creature, but Grayskull's might was such that he was able to overcome it with only minor struggle. Approaching Hordak, he flipped his weapon blade-side down and raised it above his head. "For Eternia!" he shouted before quickly plunging the blade through Hordak's armor and deep into the monster's chest. Hordak's eyes immediately snapped out of their trance to focus on the king. A look of shock spread across the warlord's face, not understanding how the sword could have pierced his mystical armor. The Horde leader's chanting stopped, breaking the connection that he shared with his wraiths.

"You're too late," Hordak said with a rasp. He looked to the portal above, which was now fully-formed. "So long as The Horde lives, I live. I will survive this attack," he said, struggling as he spoke, "but you will be lost to the void." The creature began to laugh; a croaking, gurgling sound that would have unnerved even the bravest of men.

Grayskull, however, stood fast. "That is where you are wrong," he countered, removing his sword from Hordak's chest and slamming it deep into the ground at his own feet. "The goddess will protect me." Seeing their king's actions, the remaining Eternian soldiers did the same, anchoring themselves to the ground. Even some of the more observant members of The Horde followed suit. The portal above them pulsated and grew, large enough to swallow both armies whole. With a suddenness that surprised the Eternian king, the portal fell from the sky and hovered directly above the city. Grayskull felt it pull at him and saw many of his soldiers, along with the Horde Troopers they fought, lose their grip on the weapons they had anchored to the ground. Both enemies and allies alike screamed as they were pulled into the gaping maw of the nether-dimension.

The king brought his eyes back to Hordak who was himself beginning to slide toward the portal, his armored boots skidding on the cobblestone streets of Eternia's capital city. With a look of absolute hatred on his face, the Horde leader willed his blade into his hand once more and, in a mad rush, thrust it into Grayskull's chest. Mere moments after, Hordak lost his footing and flew into the gateway to Despondos, a blood-curdling howl of anger escaping his throat as he disappeared. Without its master's touch, Hordak's sword once again faded into nothingness. Grayskull's feet began to leave the ground as well, betraying him, but the King clutched the Sword of Power tightly despite his pain. Unlike his men's, Grayskull's weapon held strong in the ground. After seconds that felt like hours, the portal dropped once more, passing violently through the ground, taking both armies and Grayskull's entire city with it.

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His eyes fluttering open weakly, Grayskull awakened to find himself lying on his back in the grasses outside where the city had once been. With significant effort, he turned his head to take in what was left. Somehow, he'd avoided both the portal and falling into the chasm it had left behind, but only just. Castle Grayskull, protected as always by an ancient spell, now stood alone atop a solemn peak at the chasm's center. It was all that remained of his capital city. The mysterious Tower of Zoar had disappeared, perhaps returning to wherever it had come from. The king briefly wondered if the other towers had followed suit. Grayskull grunted in pain as he struggled to his feet. Hordak's mystical blade had vanished, but the wound it had inflicted remained. His armor appeared to be intact and hid the magical wound from sight, but Grayskull could feel his blood seeping through the

inner layers of his clothes. A common blade would not have stopped him, but Hordak's was made from the blackest of magics. Grayskull recognized that death was upon him and felt a sense of peace wash over him that he found surprising. He'd won. Despite the terrible cost, he'd won. The jawbridge of his castle lowered, stretching across the nearly bottomless pit that now surrounded it, meeting the land where he stood. His council, along with his wife Veena, rushed toward him.

"What happened, my king?!" Eldor shouted as he approached. "All we saw was darkness. It passed as suddenly as it came, and when we looked toward the battlefield, everything was gone."

"It was a portal to Despondos," he answered weakly.

"You alone remain," Eldor told him.

"The castle still stands," Grayskull said with a visible wince.

"By the grace of Zoar," Veena replied.

"And those within the castle?" Grayskull asked. "The women and children?"

"All alive and accounted for," Eldor answered.

"Then the future of my kingdom is safe," Grayskull replied.

"Come, My King," Eldor said, holding out his hand to help steady his ruler. "Though we have lost many, we have won a great victory over evil this day." As Eldor went to help him walk, Grayskull collapsed to the ground, landing hard on his back once more.

"D'Vann!" Veena shouted, kneeling at his side.

"Hordak has struck a fatal blow," Grayskull said. "Our victory has come with great sacrifice from all who fought. Even I will soon be claimed by it."

"Surely the towers' presence has cursed us," Eldor exclaimed, "lighting a beacon for the darkness of the universe to find and snuff out."

"Do not be so sure," Veena replied. "For it was the Goddess and her tower that allowed us to survive."

"But at the cost of your husband?" Eldor asked. "At the cost of our king?" He turned back to his fallen friend. "Let my magic heal you, My Lord," the old man pleaded.

"Your magic cannot save me from this," Grayskull replied. "As powerful as you are, friend, Hordak is stronger. But my spirit will live on within all of you. You and the other members of my council will rule over Eternia until my son is old enough to take the throne. Rule with grace and wisdom and Eternia will live up to its name, surviving long past my death." Grayskull struggled to reach his sword, which lay beside him, but failed. Veena picked up the weapon carefully and placed it within his left hand, where he brought it close to his chest. "One day the darkness will return. I know this. When that time comes, may this Sword of Power, by the grace of the Goddess, grant my heirs the strength to fight it." Handing the blade back to Veena, he spoke once more. "Do what you must to keep it secret, to protect it, until the time comes."

"I will, my love," the queen said. He reached for her, bringing her lips toward his in a powerful kiss. She felt a surge of electricity as they touched, as she always did, before feeling his hand loosen its grip and fall to the ground at his side. Pulling her face away, Veena saw his eyes staring through her, to something beyond. He was gone. It took all of her strength to stand, but she did so, holding the sword aloft. "Let all here look upon the blade that pierced the heart of darkness." Each member of the council did so, the sun glinting in the shining silver of the blade. "Long live Eternia," she said. "May its light burn as bright as D'Vann Grayskull's forever more."

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"So, you see, after Grayskull's victory, the Three Towers faded into the ether, never to be seen again," Scrollos said. "Upon his death, Queen Veena vowed that his legend would live on." As he brought his story to its conclusion, the Council of Kings listened intently to Scrollos's every word. "She commanded that the story of Grayskull be taught to each generation of Eternian children and, for more than a thousand years, it has been. However, unlike Grayskull himself, for most of Eternian history the towers have been nothing but a story; a part of King Grayskull's legend that had faded into myth, but they have returned, and their doing so acts as a warning: the darkness that the first king of Eternia spoke of is returning. Surely, it is nearly at our door."

"You speak of Hordak," King Dakon said; more a statement than a question.

"Yes," Scrollos replied, "and may the power of Grayskull be with us all when he arrives."

3.

THE EMISSARY

“Well if it isn’t the prince, himself?” Randor, the former king of Eternia said as he embraced his grandson from behind. He’d found Dare and his daughter-in-law Teela in the main hall, just outside the Council Chamber.

“Grandfather!” Dare cried with delight as he turned from his mother to face Randor, who had been gone for more than a month on his latest trip as the Eternian Ambassador. “You’re back!”

“Yes, Dare, I’m back,” Randor said with a smile. His most recent journey had taken him as far as Stilia, located deep within the Ice Mountains of the North. Having returned, he couldn’t help but welcome the warm weather of Eternia. His hair and beard now fully whitened with age, Randor managed to look more distinguished than ever. He would tell anyone that he enjoyed his position as ambassador, but he’d be lying if he didn’t admit that he missed his homeland often, and his family even more so. Randor was happy to be back among them and planned on staying for an extended period before his next journey. He was sure that his son Adam would approve. The two of them communicated often, but missed each other dearly, regardless. Randor stood and pulled Teela in for a quick

embrace. She greeted him with a smile, but Randor couldn't help but notice that it seemed tight; perhaps even forced. "Where's Adam?" he asked.

"Gone," he heard a familiar voice say from behind him. Turning, he watched as his half-brother Keldor, in full armor, strode confidently into the main hall from the Council Chamber. While his hair had grayed slightly, Keldor seemed to have hardly aged at all since the day he'd betrayed Randor, now so long ago. The two of them had crossed swords in this very palace, in the throne room which lay not far from where they stood. Randor wasn't sure that he'd ever get used to seeing his estranged brother roaming the halls of Eternos Palace once more; or that he'd ever fully trust him. He trusted in his son Adam, however, and Adam trusted Keldor. They had their disagreements, but Keldor's placement on the Council of Kings had been beneficial in building a unity on the planet. His son and Keldor, two former enemies coming together for the greater good, was a prime example of what the council was all about. Because of this, Randor chose to remain silent about his own feelings on the matter.

Teela smiled at her son. "Dare, why don't you go find Papa Duncan? I'm sure he'd like to know that his best friend is home."

"Alright, Mother," Dare said. "Bye, Grandfather." The child appeared suspicious at his dismissal, but quickly obeyed. He left the hallway to look for the Eternian Man-At-Arms, but popped his head back around the corner briefly. "Bye, Uncle Keldor," he added.

"Boy," Keldor said with a nod. Randor could almost swear that he saw a twitch of a smile form on the man, but it was gone in a blink of an eye.

"Greetings, Keldor," Randor said, his voice betraying the caution that he felt whenever he was in the man's presence. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"The Council of Kings has convened," Keldor said, placing a bit of emphasis on the word "kings," reveling, at least slightly, in his brother's exclusion, even though it was a willing one.

Randor furrowed his brow. "If the council has convened, then what do you mean that Adam is gone? Why is he not meeting with them?"

"He is indisposed, for lack of a better term," Keldor answered. "The queen here has told me in confidence that both your son and your daughter have met with Veena, the original Sorceress of Grayskull."

"How is that possible? And Adora's here?" Randor exclaimed. He hadn't seen his daughter in years and was excited at the prospect of reuniting with her.

The thought of her coming home, only to suddenly leave again before he could see her, was heartbreaking.

"She used the Cosmic Key and came here from Etheria alone," Teela said. "Veena returned, how I don't know, and brought Castle Grayskull with her. She took Adam and Adora inside of it yesterday morning and that was the last I saw of them."

"Castle Grayskull is back, as well?" Randor asked, growing more alarmed with each revelation.

"As of yesterday," Teela replied. "There have been many strange occurrences in the last several days. As far as Adam and Adora, Veena promised that she would return them to us, but that they needed to prepare."

"Prepare for what?" Randor asked. "What in the worlds is going on?"

Keldor shook his head and laughed softly. "Brother, you really have no idea, do you? Where did you go on this most recent mission of yours?"

"Stilia," he answered.

Keldor nodded. "May as well have been under a rock," he remarked. "Did you see anything bizarre on your return trip?" he asked. "Any unusual phenomena that you can't explain?"

"I didn't see anything of the sort," Randor answered. "Please," he paused, "what is happening here?"

"We are in grave danger, Brother," Keldor said. "Grave enough to get the attention of the entire Council. The threat of The Horde is finally upon us. Added to that, along with Castle Grayskull, the Three Towers have also returned." Randor's eyes widened with dawning horror. "I see you've heard of them," Keldor remarked.

The former king of Eternia nodded. Their father's library was extensive and the tales of the Three Towers were mentioned often in the more obscure historical texts that Randor had gravitated toward as a boy. A chill swept over him. "Tell me what's going on."

"We will," he heard Duncan say from behind him. Turning, Randor saw Man-At-Arms walking up with Dare at his side, "but not before you greet your oldest friend." Duncan spread his arms wide and embraced Randor tightly, clapping him affectionately on the shoulders as they broke away. "How was your trip?"

"Uneventful, unlike here," Randor replied, "but I've found that that is what I enjoy the most about my position as ambassador. I'm an old man, after all," he said with a slight laugh. "I have to admit that Adam and Adora's disappearance worries me to no end, especially considering Adam's history with Castle Grayskull. I'm afraid that they are in great danger."

"I understand, Randor," Teela said. "I can't shake that feeling, myself. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do except trust in this Sorceress Veena and make our way without the two of them, at least for now."

"I suppose you're right," Randor admitted. "You've always had a good head on your shoulders, Teela. It's why I put you in charge of Adam so much when you were children. You'd never let him go astray; not purposely. But please, don't take my worrying to mean that I'm not glad to see you," he turned back to Keldor and Duncan. "All of you. Please, fill me in on what is happening, and I will do my best to help."

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Keldor glanced at Randor, who now sat in the Council Chamber with Teela and the others, Duncan having stayed behind in his workshop with Dare. Randor had been told about everything; the Three Towers' sudden reemergence and with them, the spectral buildings and monuments that had reappeared, the return of extinct species, and finally the dreams about the Horde and Hordak that not only Evelyn and his son Adam had had, but unbeknownst to the Council, his grandson Dare as well. Keldor could see that the latter fact troubled the old warrior to no end. In Adam's absence, Keldor had taken the lead when it came to working out a plan and even Randor had admitted that it made good sense. Over a small meal, prior to the council's reconvening, Keldor had gone over it with his half-brother, Teela, and Duncan. Now it was time for the ruler of the reborn Zalesia to explain it to the rest of the room's occupants, and convince them that it was the right move.

"I believe that it's only a matter of time before Hordak invades Tellus," Keldor began, careful to drive that particular point home to every member of the Council. "His means of doing so isn't our concern. With the return of the Eternian princess, whom you all know has been waging war against the Horde on the planet of Etheria for years, and the dreams that both Evelyn and King Adam have had, we must act on the assumption that he has found a way. We need to mobilize our defenses now, before he arrives. If we react to the invasion only after it has happened, we

will have already lost and Tellus will become another in a long line of planets to fall before him."

"What is Hordak's plan?" Squiddish Rex asked. "You know him better than anyone else on this Council. Surely you can enlighten us."

Keldor nodded gravely, his old ally and current annoyance obviously referring to Keldor's time with The Horde, where he apprenticed directly under Hordak in his early days as Skeletor. "You're right," he replied. He glanced around the room and met the eyes of each council member in turn. "I have served on this council since its inception. I would like to think that in that time, I have earned your trust. I don't think that it is any secret at this point who I once was, nor the acts that I carried out in those days. I don't ask for forgiveness, but I do ask for your acceptance. As Skeletor, my role as Hordak's apprentice allowed me access to more than just his grand plans for the universe, but his way of thinking as well. Hordak is, to me more than anyone, predictable, and I can tell you that if he is invading, he will do anything it takes to win. Anything. We should prepare ourselves now. We have to be ready for him."

"But what are his intentions, his 'grand plans for the universe' that you speak of?" Chief Carnivus asked in his cat-like rumble of a voice.

"He intends to destroy the universe and remake it in his image," Keldor replied.

"That's preposterous," Squiddish said with a huff in response to Keldor's words. "Even on your worst days, you were never that bold."

The king of Zalesia nodded in agreement. "Because even on my worst days, I wasn't half as insane as Hordak. Hordak has searched for the planet he calls Alpha Prime, where the universe began, for years. During my and Randor's imprisonment on Etheria, Hordak learned that Tellus is in fact that planet. Our home. Hordak's life is ruled by his obsession with prophecy. Whether you believe in it or not is irrelevant. He does. It's the reason he took the Princess Adora when she was a child, an act which Evelyn and I were regrettably involved in. It's the reason he's waited for the reappearance of the Three Towers. Their return is a vital element of the spell he plans to cast. I don't believe that he can recreate the universe; in fact, I don't think that such a thing is even possible, however I do believe that he can destroy it. He toys with nature in ways that even he does not understand. His attack was prevented by our taking away his Cosmic Key, but it's possible that he now has another. The time we've waited for, the reason for the formation of this council, has come."

Squiddish Rex opened his mouth to protest, but Randor interjected, pounding his fist on the table. “I couldn’t care less if Hordak destroyed himself in some kind of magical mishap, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let him take my family with him, much less everything else. We need to mobilize, as Keldor has said. I’m sure you all agree.” His words were met with a chorus of nods and words of approval. He was still respected as a king, even though his reign was long over.

“So, we know what Hordak plans to do,” Shun ‘Ta began, “but what are we going to do in response? What is your plan?”

“Not in response,” Keldor clarified. “In preparation. As I said before, we need to be ready for him and his army before he arrives. To this end, I have outlined my plan and discussed it with Duncan, Randor, Mekaneck and Queen Teela. They agree that it is sound.” With the press of a button on the table before him, Keldor brought up a holographic display of the planet, suspended above where they were gathered. With the press of a second button, the three towers were highlighted on the map; Zoar Tower near Castle Grayskull; the Central Tower in the Sands of Time on the outskirts of Zalesia; and lastly Viper Tower, standing alongside Snake Mountain. “We will focus on the Three Towers. While I’m not sure how they factor into Hordak’s plans, their sudden reappearance is no coincidence. We know from Scrollos’s tale of the fall of Grayskull that Hordak is aware of their power, even if we ourselves don’t fully understand them. I know that a large factor in Hordak’s spell is the correct alignment of space and time and it is my belief that the towers themselves somehow control those very elements. We know that he needs them, and that is reason enough to protect them from him.”

He indicated his half-brother. “Randor, along with Duncan, will lead a group to Viper Tower and defend it. I’m more familiar with the area, but my responsibilities lie with my kingdom, so Evelyn and I will lead another group to the Central Tower in the Sands of Time. The Sands can be treacherous and it is our belief that our magic will help protect us from its effects.”

“We hope,” Evelyn said, speaking up.

Keldor nodded. “Indeed. We hope. Along with those two groups, there will of course be a third party converging on and protecting Zoar Tower near Grayskull. Queen Teela and Mekaneck will lead that final group. We will of course have to settle which armies specifically are going to participate, but it is my hope that you will all be involved in some way.”

“What of Adam and his sister?” Dakon asked, concerned for his childhood friend. “Adora has spent years fighting Hordak. We could use her help. How does their return factor into your plan?”

Keldor shook his head. "It doesn't. I of course wish for their safe return, that they may aid us in the upcoming battle," he paused. "However, without knowing whether or not they will return in time, we can't afford to let any part of our plans hinge on their presence. If they do join us, we will of course welcome them with open arms. Until then, we're on our own." Keldor glanced around the room to see the Council's disappointment. Adam and his family were the darlings of this council and Keldor knew it. There was much respect for the Grayskull bloodline. The fact that he himself shared it often went unnoticed, it seemed. "If there are no further questions, we will call this meeting to a close. Those who choose to remain will assist in the organization of the armies."

Suddenly, a loud thump sounded from the hallway behind them. Keldor stood and turned as the door began to open. With the "click clack" sound of heavy boots on the stone floor, a man clad in black armor with red accents entered the room, a long black cloak flowing behind him. Behind him lay the bodies of the palace guards who had been tasked with protecting the council. The intruder seemed human, though he appeared deathly pale against the darkness of his armor. His gray eyes shot toward the council members like daggers as he approached, inspecting each of them in turn. His black hair was slicked back, thoroughly streaked with gray, his beard neatly trimmed. He was an older man, his face lined with age. With a smile, he revealed animal-like pointed canine teeth that made Keldor question his earlier assumption regarding his species. Worse still, upon the stranger's chest was an all-too-familiar sigil. "Greetings," the man said in a surprisingly cultured voice. "I am Lord Draco, Emissary of The Horde."

Keldor felt the hair on his arms stand on end. His worst fear had come true. The Horde weren't about to invade. They were already here.

4.

RETURN TO GRAYSKULL

"I hope you don't mind, but I let myself in," Draco said calmly, as if his cold-blooded murder of the guards was a mere inconvenience. The rest of the council members stood in unison, but Draco waved them off. "There's no need to stand on my account." When none of them sat back down, he continued. "As you wish, then. Stand."

Keldor took in the sight of the man in black armor and grinned, trying his hardest to seem unfazed by Draco's bold entrance. "Hordak has emissaries, now?" he asked. "That's never been his style."

"Only for special occasions," Draco replied, entering the room as if he owned it. He took a slow walk around the round table, absorbing the details of each member of the Council of Kings very carefully, none of which made a move to attack him, for fear that there could be countless other Horde members just outside, ready to slaughter them all. "And this is a special occasion, believe me. I have been with The Horde for some time now, having served my master from the shadows for many long years, and I've never seen him care about taking a planet as much as he does this one."

"You've not taken it yet," Teela said defiantly.

Draco glanced toward the Eternian queen and gave her a fiendish grin. "That is only a matter of time, Your Highness."

"Hordak will never take Tellus," Randor said, his face an angry grimace. His blood boiled as he felt his anger rising within him.

"We'll see," Draco replied as he completed his circle of the council table. "There are some impressive leaders on this council," he said. He eyed Squiddish Rex. "Some not so impressive ones as well."

"Why are you here?" Keldor asked bluntly. "Why, really?"

Draco's cold gray eyes flicked back to the half-gar king. "To discuss terms."

"Terms for what?" Keldor replied.

Draco chuckled lightly, followed by a brief sigh. The Horde member sounded annoyed. "The terms of your surrender, of course."

"Over my dead body," Keldor growled.

"Probably, yes," Draco conceded with a shrug. "Either way, it's of no importance to me. There aren't really any actual terms to speak of. I'm merely here to give you the message: kneel or die." Keldor drew his sword and rushed the man. In his anger, he attacked without thought of the possible consequences of his actions, but Draco caught the blade in his armored gauntlet and bent it with his sheer strength. The emissary kicked Keldor firmly in the chest, sending the king of Zalesia tumbling violently to the council chamber floor. "I expected something like that to happen, but it's still disappointing, especially coming from Keldor. He was one of us once, after all." He turned to address the rest of the council. "Anyone else? You do realize that I could have this entire city destroyed in seconds?" he asked. "You'll all be dead in the end anyway, so it doesn't matter to me. Another move like that, and I seal your fates." He indicated Keldor, who struggled to find his breath. "Still," Draco said, turning quickly and pointing his index finger at the group, "Keldor's act cannot go unpunished."

He once again began to circle the table, pausing briefly as he came upon each member. "So, who will pay for Keldor's lack of respect? You?" he asked as he approached Shun 'Ta. "No. Not you. I think perhaps," he paused as he circled, coming to a stop behind Squiddish Rex, "you." The Aquarian King spun around and eyed Draco fiercely. "Yes, I think you'll make for a fine demonstration," Draco said. Squiddish made a motion as if he were about to attack the Horde member in self

defense, but he was instead caught within the man's vise-like grasp, his armored hands wrapping around the Aquarian's throat. A black, fog-like substance began to float from Draco's gaping mouth, flowing into the Aquarian's fishy maw. After only a brief moment of the fog's contact, the grays in Draco's hair darkened to black, and lines of age upon his face faded. Immediately after the feeding, his eyes had blackened into something resembling obsidian. Now appearing youthful and revitalized, the man dropped the empty husk that had once been Squiddish Rex to the floor and turned his black eyes back to the other council members, who remained frozen in their seats. In all their years, none of them had seen anything like that. None of them except Keldor, who stared, his mouth agape. "Now you see my true power," Draco said.

"You're a Dark One?" Keldor asked. He'd already felt his anger burning within him, having lost face before the council, but now a different feeling gnawed at him as he spoke.

"Yes," Draco confirmed. "Much like your mother, in the end." This man's knowledge of Keldor's lineage surprised the half-gar king, but he said nothing. "The death of others brings me life, so by all means fight back, if you're so inclined," he said, referring to the rest of the council. "The more of you that I'm given the pleasure of killing, the more years that I will have in this universe to do the same to countless others. It would be my pleasure to have you all join your friend here," he said, indicating Squiddish's corpse.

Keldor scoffed. "I never liked him anyway."

"Of course not," Draco began, "but the next time, it could very well be someone you care about a great deal." He looked toward Evelyn and smiled wickedly, baring his fangs. Keldor tensed, but Draco held up his hand, stopping him. "There won't have to be a next time if you kneel to the master when he arrives."

"And when is that?" Randor asked.

"Soon." Draco pressed a button on his left gauntlet and immediately a bright light formed in the air; a portal opened by a cosmic key. "Kneel or die," he repeated as he stepped inside. Seconds later, it was closed and the council erupted into chaos. Keldor fumed as the realization hit him that Draco had come alone with the aid of his own Cosmic Key, which explained his sudden appearance within the palace and the fact that they'd had no warning from security. The council could have united together and killed the Horde member then and there, but they'd done nothing. Hordak ruled through fear, and while this was but the first move in Hordak's game, Keldor and his fellow council members were already losing.

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Once the outrage of the council had subsided and Rex's remains had been removed, Keldor, with the help of his brother and Teela, had resumed the meeting. The threat he'd spoken of earlier had now manifested itself in the flesh. There would be no further debate. They'd already lost the first round. It had been a mental round, but it'd still cost them three very real lives. Now, there was nothing left to do but prepare for the inevitable. They would not give in. They would not kneel. Hordak had another Cosmic Key, and Draco had used one of his own to surprise them with his sudden appearance. Still upset at Draco's embarrassing him, not to mention the entire council, Keldor stormed out of the chamber as soon as things were finalized. He didn't make it far before Evelyn caught up to him and pulled him aside. "Are we traveling to the Central Tower right away?" she asked hastily.

"No. You will head to Zalesia without me and I'll meet you there. I have another errand to attend to first," he said, his voice nearly a whisper. "I need to go to Castle Grayskull."

Evelyn gazed at him, her expression unreadable. "Why?"

"I'm not sure why, but I suddenly feel an immense desire to go there," he answered. Upon seeing her expression, he explained, "Don't worry, it's nothing to do with any of my old wants. That being said, if there is even a chance that that thing still holds some power within its bricks and stones, then I intend to use it against Hordak, to end this once and for all."

"But why must you go there alone?" she persisted. "I know how the castle makes you feel. Why torture yourself so? Don't think that I haven't noticed your lack of sleep these past few nights."

A faraway look came over his face as he found himself lost in thought. After a long, silent moment, his eyes flicked back to her own and refocused, the strange expression gone. "Don't worry, Evelyn. If no power resides there, then I will have no desire to remain. Travel to Zalesia and gather our army. Get them ready and wait for me there, as I've instructed."

"I don't understand why you feel you need to do this without me at your side, but I will respect your wishes," she said.

Keldor noticed that her words came with some difficulty. "If I don't go there now," he said, "I may never have another opportunity. I expect to find neither Adam nor Adora within the castle. I can feel that they are gone, just as I'm sure you can. Whatever mission Veena had for them, it has taken them far from here and so it's up to me to lead this council to victory, and I will do whatever it takes, whatever it takes," he repeated, emphasizing his last words, "to do that."

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Keldor approached the site of Castle Grayskull, easing back on his sky sled's throttle as he got closer. The last time he'd arrived here, he'd done so as Skeletor, just after his and Randor's escape from Etheria's Fright Zone. In his rare trips to Eternos Palace since then, he'd purposefully taken a longer route, avoiding the location of so many of his failures. But were those failures truly his, he wondered? Or did they belong to the ghost of what he had once been? There were elements of his birth as Skeletor and what was involved in it that were still secret to all but himself and Evelyn, who had been there to bear witness to it. The woman he now called his queen had been wise enough to omit the most dangerous secret of that transformation from her journal. As powerful a sorceress as she was, she knew better than to invoke the vile spirit that still haunted him, years after becoming Keldor once again. It was a spirit that refused to accept its banishment, forever clinging to his mind and soul with its cold, dead hands.

Forcing his thoughts back to the present, Keldor took in the sight of the reborn Castle Grayskull, feeling a sense of awe as he saw it again for the first time. Strangely, it looked young and vibrant, not at all as he'd remembered it. In fact, one of the towers was different entirely. The castle had obviously been through countless repairs in the centuries that lead up to the first time he'd laid eyes upon it, so many years ago. Now it appeared to be wholly new, as if it had only recently been constructed. To the castle's right was Zoar Tower, which Keldor was seeing up close for the first time. Climbing down from his Sky Sled, he took careful steps toward the edge of the abyss that separated the ancient castle from the fields surrounding it. Adam's healing of the planet when he'd given up his power had not repaired the chasm that surrounded the castle, and stood still upon that solitary peak. Despite all the differences in how the castle appeared today, that much remained the same.

A strong breeze blew in from the west, whipping his hair about violently. Still, he stood silently at the edge of the precipice, gazing at the castle. It had been the

object of his desires for so very long. In truth, it had been the desire of another, but it was hard to remember things from those days. His memories from his time as Skeletor were often muddled and confused. They were like a dream he only partly remembered the following morning, only that morning was now the rest of his life. Looking up, the Zalesian king searched the sky for Horde ships, but saw none. With the aid of a Cosmic Key, Lord Draco could have come from anywhere. There was no guarantee that the Horde fleet was even within their galaxy. Still, he reminded himself that their arrival was inevitable. He wondered if this visit to Grayskull was worth it, if there were any power left here to be had. If there was, then he would use it against The Horde. If there wasn't, then he would fight with what he had and hope that it was enough.

A loud thunk and creaking sound startled him back to the present. With the rattling of chains, the jawbridge began to lower, much to his astonishment. Never in his life had the castle opened to him willingly and he couldn't help but wonder why it was now. The Horde could wait. This new mystery was now foremost on his mind. With little further sound, the bridge completed its movement, settling into the soft grasses not ten feet from where Keldor stood. With no small amount of trepidation, the man formerly known as Skeletor, who had spent much of his life trying to enter and conquer the castle before him, stepped up onto its bridge and began to make his way inside, wondering what awaited him and who, or what, had invited him.

5.

NO SAFE PLACE

Teela ran hurriedly down the Eternos Palace hallway with her father-in-law Randor and her friend Mekaneck following close behind. After what had just transpired in the council chamber, the only thing on her mind was to get to her son and ensure that he was safe. She'd intended to also take Scrollos with them, but as soon as Draco appeared before the Council of Kings, the mysterious scribe had vanished. "This is more serious than Keldor and I had realized," she said to her father-in-law Randor as they got closer to their destination. "We felt, along with Adam, that a Horde invasion was inevitable, but this Draco character has moved the timetable up considerably."

"You've spoken with Keldor at length about this?" Randor asked.

"No, only briefly," she answered, "shortly before the Council convened."

"Do you trust my brother to do his part in this war?" he pressed.

"Father, I know you haven't seen much of him due to your travels, but Keldor has proven himself to the Council time and time again. Even Adam has a begrudging respect for him," she replied. "More than that, this is The Horde we're

talking about. I don't think anyone outside of Adora hates Hordak more than Keldor does."

"You're right, Teela," Randor agreed. "I've been gone for much of the time that the truce has been in effect. Perhaps he has changed. Perhaps not. Either way, one thing I'm very familiar with is his pride, and you're right. He'll do anything in his power to stop Hordak. I just want to make sure that he has my family's best interests in mind, as well."

"It's his family too," Teela corrected him, surprising even herself with her words. She never thought she'd accept the fact that the man who'd once been Skeletor was family, but apparently at some point she had without even realizing it. "Personally, I'm just happy that he's on our side," she finished.

"I agree with Teela, Your Majesty," Mekaneck said, respectfully using Randor's old title. "It was due to our war with Skeletor that I was disfigured in the first place, so I have every right to hate him, but she's right. Keldor may not be a friend, but he's proven himself several times over as an ally. Besides that, when we travelled to Zalesia and Keldor told us of the Three Towers' return, there was something in his eyes that I'd never seen before."

"And what was that, Orius?" Randor asked.

"I think I'd call it fear," Mekaneck replied, "or something as close to fear as Keldor can feel. Even his arrogance couldn't hide it completely. Of course, I tend to see things in a little more detail than most people do."

"Then I'll take you both at your word," Randor said, "which is worth more than enough to me."

They reached Duncan's quarters in record time and Teela knocked hastily. The door cracked open and the queen looked down to see Dare peeking through the opening. "Hi, Mama," he said cheerily, pulling the door the rest of the way open to allow them in. "Hi Grandfather. Hi Orius."

"Hello, Little Man," Orius said with a smirk.

Teela picked Dare up and embraced him, silently thanking whatever gods were listening that he was safe. "Why are you all so sad?" the child asked.

"We're not sad, my boy," Randor replied. "We just have a lot of work to do."

"There's always work," Dare sighed, as his mother placed him back on the ground.

"I've often said that he's wise beyond his years," Duncan said, standing from his workbench to greet them. He'd been tinkering with a project in secret for some time now, but Teela couldn't make heads or tails of what it was. As much as she and her father had in common when it came to training and fighting, she'd never shared his skill with machines. That's why he'd been so taken with Orius and Raenius, who were savvier than she was with such things. It was then that Teela noticed the laser pistol clutched tightly in the man's hand. "I was informed of what happened the The Horde Emissary, but I've kept it to myself," Duncan said, indicating Dare. "I didn't want to scare him."

"Scare me how?" Dare asked. "What's The Horde?"

Teela knelt down and spoke to her son directly. "Bad people, Dare, and they're coming here, but I don't want you to be afraid. No matter what happens, I'll always be there to protect you, along with everyone else here, do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama. I just wondered," he replied. "I'm not scared."

Teela smiled. "Good."

"I take it the council is sufficiently convinced of the threat, then," Duncan said. "It's a shame it had to come to something like this happening. I knew those two guards. They were good young men, and Mer-Man wasn't so bad in the end. Why did no one attack this Draco character?" Duncan asked, alarmed that such a tragedy could happen within a meeting of the Council of Kings without some form of retaliation.

"Keldor did attack him, but was unsuccessful. Mer-Man's death was actually punishment for his actions. There was nothing we could do," Teela replied. "We didn't realize that he was alone until it was too late. He threatened to bring the entire Horde down on us early and destroy the city if we didn't hear him out. We had no way of knowing whether he was bluffing or not until he used his Cosmic Key to leave right in front of us. Then we knew he'd been alone. It was as if he were rubbing our faces in our failure to act, but I assure you, it won't happen again."

"It's just as well," Randor began. "There was nothing we could have done without making the situation worse. We're not ready for an attack yet. In fact, Hordak did us a favor by showing his hand. Not only did his threat unite the Council of Kings, but we now know the urgency in which we need to rally the planet's defenses."

Duncan nodded. "I've been working on something to that effect, but it's nowhere near ready," he said grimly. "I can see your point and I suppose you're

right," he conceded. "Killing him would have only invited disaster and we have enough going against us as it is, with both Adam and Adora gone. Looking to his oldest friend, he smiled weakly. "What happened to the days when you were the hot-headed one?"

"I got old," Randor replied.

"I'm old too," Duncan said, "but my fuse seems to get shorter with age while yours lengthens." He began to pace the room in thought. "So Keldor has a plan, I know. Has that changed any due to this?"

"Only slightly, and of my own accord," Teela replied. "We are still going to protect the towers we are assigned to, but the handful of us will be making a short journey elsewhere first. We need all the help we can get, so we're going to travel to Castle Grayskull to see this Sorceress Veena. Hopefully she can get you and Randor to Etheria in order to bring the members of the Great Rebellion here. Randor's been there before and has met Castaspella, so they'll know him. We need Adora's friends and without her here to recruit them, Randor is the next best candidate. Meanwhile, Dare and I will stay at Grayskull. I can think of no safer place for him."

"There is no safe place," Duncan said solemnly, "not with Hordak in possession of a new Cosmic Key. He could enter Castle Graykull on a whim."

"You're right, father, but it's still the safest option. Protecting Dare will fall on myself and Orius and when the time comes to fight, we'll have added help."

"But what if Veena doesn't let us in? You're putting a lot of faith in a woman we barely know," Mekaneck said, voicing the silent question that was on Teela's mind as well.

"She was Grayskull's wife. That must mean something," Teela answered. "She said before that the castle is open to the heirs of Grayskull and Dare is his direct descendant. When it comes to us, we'll just have to hope that she's feeling hospitable."

"When do we leave?" Dare asked, excited to be going on an adventure, even if he didn't fully understand the danger.

"Right now," Teela said. "Pack your things."

6.

DESTINY

Keldor felt a sense of unease settle into his bones as Castle Grayskull's jawbridge closed behind him with a low, resounding thud. Despite his subconscious mind screaming at him to turn around, that this was too good to be true, his body continued moving forward in the eerie silence of the castle. The interior was lit by torches placed along the walls throughout the large room. He noted that the inside of the castle was to be much larger than its outside appearance would imply, but Keldor expected no less from a place so steeped in magic. It was a simple trick, probably impressive to the layman, but quaint in the eyes of an experienced sorcerer such as himself. Nevertheless, he admired the spell for it meant that there was no telling what secrets could be hidden within Castle Grayskull's walls, for the space inside was itself an illusion.

Ahead of him he caught sight of a small stairway that ascended to the castle's throne. Keldor approached the high-backed chair cautiously, climbing the steps one by one until he was close enough to touch it. The throne itself was a surprisingly high-tech marvel and it amazed him that such a thing could have existed nearly a thousand years ago as its technology rivaled what they had currently. Upon closer examination, he recognized that it may in fact surpass it, for

there were several instruments that he didn't recognize. He could only imagine what the primitives of ages past must have thought when they saw it. It was very curious indeed. A strange feeling came over Keldor as he took in the sight of it. The throne may have been used by various Sorceresses over the centuries but it had only truly belonged to one man: his ancestor King Grayskull. In the beginning, Castle Grayskull had been at the core of Eternia. After the death of King Grayskull, the kingdom had relocated. Besieged by evil forces from the Dark Hemisphere, recently created by Hordak's spell of separation folly, it had been necessary to protect the people, who no longer had their hero to protect them. That the royal bloodline had survived at all was a minor miracle. In the time since its abandonment, the castle had faded into legend, and rightly so. It was a fascinating place. Keldor reached his right hand toward the golden throne, running his cold fingers along the delicate circuitry of its arms, the red velvet padding that lined the seat, the blue accents that highlighted its beauty. The feel of it was comforting to him. *So many years, he thought. For so many years have I wanted this.*

And now it is yours, at least for the moment, he heard a female voice say.

Startled, he spun to face the voice's owner, but saw no one. He couldn't actually tell where it was coming from. Strangely, he realized that it sounded as if it were within his own mind. "Who goes there?" he demanded.

Sit upon the throne, Keldor, and we can be properly introduced.

Fearing a trick, he refused. "Who are you to command me?" he asked defiantly.

A soft laugh seemed to fill the room. *All those years trying to enter my home, to sit upon that throne, and when you are finally invited, you would refuse it out of stubborn pride?*

"I have my own throne," he replied.

But it means nothing to you, the voice said. *Not compared to this one.*

Keldor smiled. "You have me confused with someone else."

Many do, the voice responded, but I see the truth of Skeletor, Keldor, as I see the truth of all things. I am thankful that your dark half is not here. She paused and Keldor felt a shiver run down his spine. She knew. *You have passed my test, Keldor. You are alone. You've only been allowed to enter because he is not with you.* This voice knew secrets, Keldor realized. His secrets. He found the thought unsettling. *But, she continued, now that you have passed, please be seated. You must be upon the throne in order to complete your journey to me.* Keldor realized

that he likely had no choice, and sank carefully onto Grayskull's throne. He contemplated the feeling, only momentarily, that it suited him. The thought was hardly completed before he heard the voice again, this time a whisper in his left ear. *The red button.* He glanced at the throne's controls, an overwhelming sea of lights and color, but his eyes found the button in question. He pressed it gently, a strange feeling of excitement settling over him as he remembered where he was and upon whose throne he sat. With a hiss of air, the throne plummeted into the floor as if the castle had swallowed both it and him. He dug his hands into the armrests to hold on as he descended far into the depths of the castle and beyond.

When the chair finally came to a rest, Keldor found himself enveloped within complete darkness. "What is this?" he asked, trying to remain calm. "Where am I?"

"You are in the caves beneath Grayskull," the voice answered, no longer sounding as if it were coming from inside of him, but instead as real as if the woman speaking were standing not ten paces in front of him. "Close your eyes," she said. To his own surprise, he complied without question, quickly learning why she had told him to do so, as he found the cave suddenly enveloped in light. He opened his eyes slowly, allowing them to adjust to the brightness. "I welcome you, Keldor, to Subternia, the heart of Tellus. Even He-Man himself has not set foot here."

The king of the Gar took in the sight of the cave, now lit by a phosphorescent glow, but one much brighter than was natural. Before him stood a winged woman, her white and gold armor gleaming. Upon her head was an armored headdress of gold, reminiscent of one belonging to someone he once knew. "Greetings, Sorceress Veena, Queen of Grayskull. If that is indeed who you are."

"I have taken many forms; used many names. Veena is but one."

"Who are you really?" he asked, pleased with himself for correctly assuming that there had to be more to this woman. After all, she was supposed to be long-dead. "Who is the being hidden within these forms?"

"Your people refer to me as Zoar."

"The goddess in human form?" he asked rhetorically. "I've never given much thought to the gods, personally, yet here you are before me. I suppose that that does make sense," he acknowledged, thinking aloud. "The power of the Grayskull bloodline is yours then, I take it? A blessing from your union with the man?"

"In a manner of speaking," she answered.

"And my connection to the Grayskull bloodline, now that I am Keldor once more, that is why I was allowed inside the castle," he reasoned.

"You are here because I called you, though you may not realize it," she replied. "Your sudden need to return to this castle was not your own. For that, I apologize, but I wished to speak with you."

"Why?" he asked, visibly ruffled by the thought of her influencing his actions. He'd already dealt with such a thing enough throughout his life.

"Adam and Adora will return, but in the meantime, with them gone, you will lead Tellus against Hordak and his forces," Veena answered. "You must be strong to take on this burden, Keldor. You must be prepared. Most of all you must be cleansed."

"Cleansed of what?" he asked.

"That which still plagues you, though you do not let it show. Even your closest confidants do not know how you suffer. I know what you have sought for so long, Keldor. With my help, you can finally find it."

"And what is that, exactly?"

"Your freedom," she said. "From the ghost of Skeletor."

"I am already free of him," Keldor said quickly. Too quickly, he realized, suddenly self-consciously aware of his inability to meet her eyes as he spoke the words.

"We both know that that is not true," she said. "As long as the spirit of Karak Nul lives on in darkness, so will your soul belong to him and his curse."

She speaks his name? Keldor thought. "You know?" he asked.

She nodded. "I know a great many things, Keldor. I know that while you have separated his spirit from your body, it still lives. I know that though you have imprisoned his essence beneath the Zalesian temple, his grip on your soul still lingers, and that his influence on your mind and thoughts haunts you to this day."

Keldor relaxed his shoulders, relieving a tension he hadn't realized he'd felt. "Yes," he said softly. "He still haunts my mind; my soul. I hear him even as we speak. His voice is quiet now, buried deep below my conscious mind, but always there, beckoning to me to return to him."

"Then it is time to finally be free of his influence," she replied, "to send him to the oblivion he has thus far avoided."

"How?" he asked. "How do I kill that which is already dead?"

"Follow me," she said. Turning, she said, "No one has set foot in Subternia for nearly a thousand years, Keldor. Not since King Grayskull himself forged the Sword of Power within the Star Seed's fires. Your being granted access is a great honor."

No further coaxing was required for Keldor to do as she said and he followed her willingly. Whatever her purpose, she was right. He was seeing things that no man had seen in an eon, and this woman, apparently the Goddess herself, had chosen him alone to show it to. He didn't question why, but instead chose to do something he was generally unaccustomed to: he would simply be quiet and listen to what she had to say, and learn from her words.

"Long ago," she began, "during the reign of my sister Serpos, the Snake Men controlled Tellus. For much of that age, the Snake Men were ruled by a nearly immortal being who, having grown lonely in his isolation, had manipulated the natural snakes of his homeland. Using his magic and the powerful Staff of Ka, he shaped them in his image. He taught the serpents to speak and walk upright; to live as he did, for the other humanoid races of the time were still dwelling in caves, and certainly couldn't be seen as worthy company by a being such as him. Over the centuries, this new serpentine race multiplied and spread across the lands. Indeed in time, the Snake Men, with their superior intellect, inherited the world, and yet peace between them and the other intelligent creatures of Tellus remained steadfast. But all things must end. Eventually, the Snake Men's creator was overthrown by one of his own children, known as Hiss, who twisted the Snake Men and their progeny thereafter to evil, teaching them that they were genetically superior to all other races, and leading them to both blood and glory.

"Centuries would pass," she continued, "before pockets of resistance grew and mankind began to push back against their oppressors. The ancient city of Zalesia, which you now call home, was one of the few bastions of freedom that those early people founded. War with the Snake Men ensued, and lasted for many long years before, to end it, the Council of Elders formed a treaty with Hiss. This treaty was primarily made in order to keep Zalesia's magical artifacts, obtained over the years, hidden from Hiss, for if he were to obtain them, he could use their power to bring the other races to extinction. Since those days, the ancient city of Zalesia has always safeguarded treasures, from the Spell Stone to the Havok Staff and many other items long thought lost, and it did so in secret for much of its history.

Upon the city's destruction, rumors began to spread of its hidden vault. Treasure hunters far and wide braved the Sands of Time in their unsuccessful efforts to locate it. Now, many centuries later, Zalesia's purpose as the keeper of magical artifacts is well-known, at least among those interested in the arcane." Veena paused, a wry smile lifting her lips slightly. "However, Castle Grayskull's treasure room has remained secret yet, and it holds wondrous things of its own."

"This creator of the Snake Men," Keldor began, briefly stopping, "what happened to him? Did Hiss kill him?"

"No," she replied as she turned to face him. "For whatever his reasons, Hiss let him live. It would be the last mercy the serpentine king would ever show another living being. And so, outnumbered by his own creations, their former ruler had no choice but to exile himself once more, this time near the Mountains of Gnarl," she paused. "But enough about him. Come." She beckoned him to follow further and he did so without hesitation. Any further questions about this mysterious being she spoke of would have to wait.

Veena continued to lead Keldor deeper into the tunnels beneath the castle until, despite his efforts to the contrary, he found himself utterly lost. "I'm sure you know that Castle Grayskull and your Zalesian temple are linked by magic, along with other sites of great power such as Snake Mountain, once known as the Temple of Serpos," she said. "The world's magic flows through its lands like veins in the body, with the most powerful sites acting as its organs. Each of those organs has its secrets, and Grayskull, built by a powerful wizard over the heart of the world, the Star Seed, has more than most. The protection of this area by my Sorceresses, clothed in my image and blessed with a fraction of my power, have kept those secrets safer than those of other sites of power. As such, they remain unimagined to this day."

"Then why are you showing me, of all people?"

Veena stopped and turned, putting her hands gently on his shoulders, a motherly gesture that made him feel uncomfortable considering how he felt about his own. "Because you, Keldor, are more important than you know."

Confused, he pressed on. "But I'm not a part of the prophecy and its destruction of the darkness," he replied. "It speaks of the twins alone."

"The twins are at the center of the prophecy of course, but you stand at the edge of it, as you have most things throughout your life. You've not inherited the gifts of the Grayskull bloodline, but you are a part of it. You are linked, yet still separate."

"A chain is only as strong as its weakest link," he rebutted.

"You misunderstand, Keldor," she replied. "You may be a link from the same chain, but you are no longer attached to it."

"Because, like it, I am broken," he said.

Veena shook her head in response, her grip on his shoulders tightening. "No. Because you are free. You are loosely tied to the blood of Grayskull, yes, and to the twins and their destiny, but you are not tethered to it. What fate has written as their future does not apply to you."

"I don't understand," Keldor admitted. "What is it that you are trying to tell me?"

"That in this game that we are playing for your world's survival, you are the wild card," she replied. "For so long you have sought your life's purpose, for so many years you have thrashed against the world, longing to discover your destiny," she paused and the hair on the back of Keldor's neck rose in anticipation, "but you have none."

"What do you mean?" he asked, dumbfounded.

"Every living being has a destiny; a role to play in history. You have always known that you were different, and you are," she replied. "Keldor, you have no destiny, at least none that is known to me."

He snarled and knocked her hands away violently. "And I'm supposed to be pleased with this?!" he bellowed.

"Yes," she said simply.

"Why?"

"You were chosen, Keldor," she told him. "Only a god or goddess could erase your name from the book of life."

"I've been erased from the book of life?" he growled, stunned and somehow even more infuriated than before. "What does that mean? If I have been struck from the gods' own book of life, then I am insignificant. How do I even exist here and now?"

"You exist as you always have. Your name, however, has been omitted. Do you think that it was done for the sake of cruelty?" she asked. "That it was done without purpose? I suspect that one of my siblings has plans for you, plans that

even I am not aware of. They must, and I believe that I understand why. Hordak knows the prophecy better than anyone, save for myself. He knows much of what is to come. But you, dear Keldor, are unnamed in the books of life, and therefore the books of prophecy as well. Within those many tomes, in all the thousands of years that mankind has used his magic to divine the future, you have not had a word uttered of you. Do you understand?"

He furrowed his brow in thought, his anger subsiding. "If I'm not involved in the prophecy, in any of them, then Hordak has no idea what to expect of me, nor of my actions."

She smiled warmly. "At last, you begin to understand."

"You didn't do this?" he asked. "You're not lying to me?"

"No," she replied. "I have my suspicions of which sibling it was, though I must keep them to myself. I'd hate to ruin their design in ignorance."

Keldor nodded slowly. Only a god could have done this. If not Zoar, then there were only two other options. Maybe one day he'd learn the truth. For now, there were other questions to ask. "What has any of this to do with the curse of Karak Nul?"

"I can understand your confusion," she said. "Come, and I will show you." She resumed walking deeper into the tunnels beneath Castle Grayskull. Soon the tunnels gave way to a massive cavern, lit by torches that flared up with a simple gesture from his guide. Keldor followed her to an immense door, carved into the stone of the cavern itself. She raised her right hand and it slid open at her command. "As long as Karak Nul's festering spirit haunts you, your true strength will elude you. He must be destroyed."

"Then I ask you again: how can I kill that which is already dead?" Keldor said as they entered a treasure room that put even Zalesia's to shame.

Veena approached a wall of swords and indicated a particularly dangerous looking one, forged of black steel, a skull immaculately carved into its hilt. "With this." Reaching up, he took the enchanted blade and could feel an eerie warmth present where there should have been nothing but cold metal within his grasp. "It is called 'Soulslayer,'" she continued, "and its magic can destroy any evil spirit that has taken possession of a physical form."

"Soulslayer," Keldor repeated. "Not the kind of weapon I would expect to find within the stores of Castle Grayskull, itself ever the beacon of light." His tone was slightly mocking, but she either didn't notice or chose to ignore it.

"The sword has been locked away here for safekeeping," she replied. "It is a contradiction of a weapon; forged to destroy evil souls, yet it can only be wielded by one that has itself been touched by the darkness of evil. Anyone pure of heart would be driven mad at its touch."

"Are you too pure to touch it, Goddess?" he asked, noticing that she hadn't done so. "Do I now wield a weapon that not even a god could hold?"

Without hesitation, Veena reached out and placed her hand upon the blade. "I am neither good nor evil, Keldor. I am both life and death, the forest and the fire that burns it." Taking her hand back, he saw her in a whole new light, one that he would contemplate for some time.

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Keldor made his way back to Zalesia quickly, running his Sky Sled at its top speed. During his exit from Grayskull's store room and his journey out of the castle itself, he and the Goddess had continued their conversation on destiny and fate, and Keldor's position outside of all of it. He'd eventually seen the benefits of it, and there were many more than simply those which Veena had revealed to him. Keldor now knew that not only did Hordak not know what to expect from him, but that even Zoar herself was blind to him and his intentions, and he knew that that was far more power than he'd ever wielded in his storied past. Whatever the will of the god who'd erased his name from the book of life, he planned to make good use of the opportunity he'd been given.

Adam may have had the power of Grayskull, and his sister Adora the power of the Sorceress, but both were puppets in their own way; mere pawns in the games of the Goddess, who stood in the background, pulling their strings. He fought away the thought that she may also be pulling his own, for he'd spent his life fighting for his independence, fighting against any who would seek to control him. Regardless of what the Goddess knew or didn't know, Hordak was blind to him. Long ago, he'd told Adora that he fought for his legacy. It was only now, in this moment, that he knew without a doubt what that legacy would be: victory.

7.

THE ORDER OF ZOAR

Teela, along with Dare, Randor, Duncan and Mekaneck, climbed out of her Wind Raider and approached the reborn Castle Grayskull cautiously. The structure itself, although seemingly younger than she'd ever seen it, still appeared ominous and foreboding to Teela's eyes. She glanced down to her son, who gripped her hand tightly. Castle Grayskull had collapsed before he was born, and yet the look she saw upon his face was one of recognition. He looked up at her and smiled. "I've been here before, Mama," he said.

"In your dream, right?" she asked.

"Yes," he said with a nod, "but that's not the only time I've been here."

Teela's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," the boy replied. "I just know I've been here before somehow."

"That's impossible, Dare," she said. "The castle was gone before you were born."

"Nothing is impossible, Mama," he said, so matter-of-factly that it took her by surprise.

"It's been many years since I've been here in person," Randor said. "When Adora was taken from Marlena and me, I found myself in a heated argument with the Sorceress. I saw this gate shut that day for what I thought would be the last time. I can't tell you how happy I am that it wasn't."

Teela smiled. She knew that Randor was incredibly proud of Adam. Randor may have turned his back on Grayskull once, but it had never turned its back on him and his family. Adam's tapping into the power of Grayskull and becoming He-Man had been only one of many times where the Sorceress of Grayskull that they knew, secretly Teela's mother, had helped Randor and his family. She had continued to protect the bloodline of Grayskull, even after her fallout with Randor in his early years as king. *And for good reason*, Teela heard a voice say within her mind. Shea recognized that it was Veena's. Suddenly, the castle's jawbridge slowly lowered across the chasm that separated it from where they all stood. Waiting in the doorway, bathed in the light of the sun, stood Veena herself, clothed in her Zoarian armor, wings spread wide before folding inward.

"That's the lady from my dream," Dare said, confirming Teela's suspicions that it was not in fact her mother that he'd seen. "Can we go inside?" he asked.

Teela nodded cautiously as Veena motioned for them to enter. "Yes," she replied. "It seems we can."

"I've never actually been inside before," Mekaneck said, struggling and failing to conceal his excitement.

Randor chuckled and clapped him on the back. "Neither have I."

"It's definitely something to see," Duncan said quietly. There was a pain in his voice that Teela noticed immediately and shared. She hung back and waited until he was beside her, where she took his hand into her own. The last time the two of them had been within the castle, her mother had sacrificed her life for his as her final gesture. It was a difficult memory, full of mixed emotions. She'd gotten her father back from the brink of death, coupled with the revelation that her mother was not only alive, but was The Sorceress, only to lose her shortly thereafter. Teela 'Na had used the last of her power to save Duncan, the man she loved. Teela was of course overjoyed to still have her father, and for him to know his grandson, but those feelings were always coupled with the sadness of having lost the opportunity to really know the woman who'd brought her into the world. Teela imagined that

her mother would have truly loved Dare and the queen wished that she could have met him.

"C'mon, guys!" Dare called, snapping Teela back to the present. Her son stepped onto the bridge ahead of them, completely unafraid of the chasm below, and ran forward excitedly, the rest of them not far behind. Veena stepped aside and welcomed the group as they entered. Once they were inside, the door began to close, its massive chains moving nearly noiselessly. Turning to Veena, Teela spoke. "Thank you for letting us in this time."

"I apologize for not allowing you to enter the last time you were here, Teela," Veena said. "The timing was simply not right. As it is, you are not my first visitor today. Keldor left not an hour ago."

"You let Keldor enter the castle?" Randor asked, obviously shocked. Keldor, as Skeletor, had spent years trying to enter this very place due to his all-consuming obsession to control its hidden power. The idea of his being allowed to enter it now, even after all this time, was baffling to the former king.

"Yes," she replied. "He came because I called him. He is not the man he was. He no longer craves the power held here and, like all of you, he has a role to play in the coming war."

"Never mind Keldor," Teela said. "Where did you send my husband and his sister? What exactly is their mission?"

"They were sent to the past," Veena told her, "to gain the power needed to confront Hordak."

"The past?" Randor said incredulously. "But we need them with us. Hordak is already here now."

Veena shook her head. "Not yet, but soon. Adam and Adora, as He-Man and She-Ra, will return in time to defeat him."

"How can you know this?" Randor asked.

"Trust in Zoar," she said simply.

"You spoke to me in my mind," Teela said, "just before we entered. You said, 'and for good reason.' What did you mean?"

Veena nodded. "You'd thought of how the Sorceress of your time had never abandoned Randor and his family. You were right, for it was her duty not to. The

Order of Zoar was put in place not only to guard this castle and the power it hides, but to protect the Grayskull bloodline."

"The Order of Zoar?" Teela asked.

"A group that I began in my days as queen and personally ensured would continue long after I was gone," Veena replied. "The various Sorceresses of Grayskull were all members, but there have also been others, who remain unknown to you."

"Speaking of your time being gone," Mekaneck began, "how is it you're here? Uh," he stammered, "if you don't mind my asking. You must understand my curiosity. I mean you've been dead for over a thousand years."

"Have I?" Veena asked with a smirk. Ignoring Mekaneck's look of bewilderment, she continued. "I know why you are here, Teela. As I've explained, The Order of Zoar has protected the Grayskull bloodline for many generations. You've done the right thing bringing your son here." She glanced down to Teela's side and took in the sight of Dare, who stood with his mouth agape at the sight of the winged woman. "So, this is the future king," she said. When the child simply nodded, she smiled warmly and knelt to his level, her wings stretching out behind her. "You look much like your father," she said. "He is a great man, as you will be one day."

"You really think so?" he asked.

"I know so," she replied. "Don't worry, young prince. You'll be safe here." She stood up and looked back to Teela. "As for the other reason you're here," she motioned in the air with her hand, causing a ball of light to appear in front of her. She reached into it and removed the Cosmic Key, which she'd been keeping safe in Adora's absence. "I have promised you that He-Man and She-Ra will return in time, but you are right in that you will need more allies to fight by your side."

"How is it that you always seem to know everything?" Teela asked.

"Much of what you know about me is true, Teela. I was the queen of D'Vann Grayskull. I was the first Sorceress of this castle. However, I am much more than just that, more than what you will find in any scroll or history book. Veena, this form you see before you, is only a fraction of my true self," Veena confessed. "Mortals refer to me as Zoar, which should also answer Orius's earlier question as to how I stand among you all now."

"You're the Goddess?" Randor asked, unable to hide his monumental shock.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"Then what was Grayskull?" he asked.

"The man I loved," she replied. "The Order of Zoar protects the bloodline because it is mine, not his."

"If you're really the Goddess, why don't you just destroy Hordak, then?" Teela asked incredulously. "Why did Adam and Adora have to go anywhere? What's the point of all of this?"

"Hordak's time will come, but it won't be at my hand. As the Goddess, I am but one of three. The others are less concerned with human affairs and I can't act fully of my own accord. We decreed long ago that none of us were to act directly. When that happens, it never goes well. The last time we did, it led to the death of nearly all life in what you know as the Great Wars."

"I don't understand," Teela replied. "How can gods have rules?"

"I wish I had the time to explain everything to you, but time is Serpos's purview and we do not have it. Everyone has their role to play in the coming events. I will be there in my own way. In the meantime, Randor and Duncan need to get to the rebels on Etheria," she paused, handing the Comic Key to Randor, "before it's too late. The world of Etheria will not be as you last saw it, Randor. The war between The Horde and the Great Rebellion has changed it."

"I understand. War is unfortunately something I'm all-too-familiar with," he replied, holding the key gingerly as he took it from her. "Where will I be able to locate the rebels? Outside of The Fright Zone, the only place I've really been is the outskirts of the Whispering Woods."

"A good place to start," Veena said. "The rebels make their home there, most of the time. Dare and Teela will be safe here with me, along with Orius. We have work of our own to do."

8.

SECRETS

“You’re back,” Evelyn said, meeting Keldor at the Temple of Zalesia’s open entrance.

“I’m back,” he replied.

“And?” she prodded.

“And I have much to do.” He continued his march through the temple, heading toward the passage that would lead him to the depths beneath them.

“What happened at Grayskull?” Evelyn demanded, stepping in front of him and blocking his way. “I’m your wife, not an idiot. I know you’re troubled. What did you see?”

“It was less what I saw than what was revealed to me,” he said, reluctantly stopping to talk. He knew Evelyn well enough by now to know that she wouldn’t let him continue until she was satisfied. “I was invited inside and met Veena, myself. It turns out she’s more than just some back-from-the-dead Sorceress of Grayskull.”

“Really? What do you mean?” she asked.

"Veena is the goddess Zoar in human form," he answered. Evelyn's eyes widened. Even with her history of serving under Kuduk Ungol, a past Sorceress of Grayskull, this was news to her. Either Ungol hadn't known, or she had purposefully kept the information from her apprentice, as she had so many other things. The old Sorceress had never fully trusted her. "One part of what she told me was for me alone to hear," he continued, "but the other is something that I must do. Something I'll need you to assist me with in case things go wrong." Somewhat reluctantly, she stood to the side and when he continued making his way to his destination, she followed close behind.

"Where are we headed?" she asked.

"Down."

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Approaching the chamber below the Zalesian temple, Keldor stopped and turned toward Evelyn. "You need to wait here, my dear," he said, "for your own safety."

"We both know the foul thing that lurks behind that door, Keldor," she began, "why do you suddenly insist on doing everything alone?"

"Because," he paused, searching for the right words. Explaining his feelings was not a talent he possessed. It was something he'd always found difficult, ever since he was a child. "For much of my life, I only cared about myself. Long after our time together began, I felt that way still. It's only recently, in these past years free of Skeletor, that I have come to understand what you mean to me."

"You want to protect me," she said; more a statement than a question.

"You don't need my protection," he said. "You never have. I just don't want to take any unnecessary risks."

"It's more than that. It's this Draco character. He's unsettled you, hasn't he?" Evelyn asked, getting to the heart of it. "I mean besides the threat of The Horde, by the way. There's something about him specifically that is bothering you. He mentioned your mother. How does he know of her?"

"I don't know," he replied.

"Then what is a Dark One?" she asked. "I've never heard you mention such a thing before and not only is this man one, but he claims that your mother was, as well?"

"Yes," Keldor said, thinking back to a time he would rather forget. "It happened after our banishment from Eternia by my father Miro," he began. "We travelled over much of Tellus in our exile. Being not only a powerful witch, but a Gar, my mother was seldom welcome anywhere, and even when she was, it never lasted long. We often had to find shelter in the wild. There was an incident one night in a cave we'd wandered into. We thought we'd finally found a place that would keep us safe, but something else already called that cave its home; a Dark One, the first I'd ever seen. Its skin was pale as milk, its eyes gray and hungry. It attacked us shortly after we entered. My mother fought back with her magic and eventually destroyed the monster, but it was too late. It had already bitten her, somehow infecting her with its ancient disease."

Upon reflecting, Keldor became uncharacteristically quiet, pulling Evelyn close and gently running his fingers through her white hair as he held her. "I told you that Shokoti abandoned me, but that was not the truth," he admitted. "The truth is that I ran from her in fear. It didn't take long for her infection to run its course, changing her into one of those things. From that point on, she needed to extinguish life in order to survive. The first time I saw it happen, it terrified me. Her eyes became as black as the night sky, just as Draco's had in the Council Chamber. She'd blackened her eyes with magic in the past, to intimidate, but this was different. This time, they were truly empty, devoid of any kindness. Whatever she'd lacked before as a mother, she'd still had a soul. Now, there was nothing behind those eyes but hunger. I knew then that it was only a matter of time before that hunger outweighed what little maternal instinct she had, that one day I would become her prey." He paused in remembrance of that night, a night he'd avoided thinking about for many long years. "With that realization, I ran, and I never looked back. Though I heard rumors of her after that, I never saw my mother again."

The two of them stood silently for a long moment before she spoke. "Draco," she said, "how can he know this if even I have never heard it from your lips?"

"No soul has," Keldor replied. "To know it, he had to have known her." She looked up at him as he let her go and she saw that he was shaken from telling his story. His mother was not someone he spoke of lightly, and now she more fully understood why. "To defeat Hordak and his army, I will need power," Keldor reasoned, "and not the kind of power that the Goddess gave me in Grayskull. I need to become something more. Something more powerful than either of them. When I enter this chamber at my back, I will face my fear and no matter what the

outcome, I will exit it a different man. I will either destroy that spirit, freeing myself of his hold forever, or he will destroy me. If the latter happens, you know what to do. You must repeat the spell you placed on me so many years ago. You must make my mind clear. Do you understand?" he asked. He knew that she was capable of wielding the sword called Soulslayer if it came to that, but he was not yet ready to tell her all his secrets.

"Yes, I understand," she said quietly, feeling as though he were already slipping away from her in that very instant. She'd fought for so long to bring her lover peace. She knew now that that was impossible with things as they were. Keldor was a man fraught with demons, both emotional and physical. Maybe when this was all over, and the spirit of Karak Nul was destroyed, at least one of those demons would be no more. Perhaps then she will have finally succeeded in her goal. "I will wait for you here," she said. "If you do not exit, no power in this universe will keep me from entering and finding you."

Keldor knew he would never convince her otherwise. "Remember the spell," he said quietly, "in case all of this goes wrong." Letting her go, he unsheathed Soulslayer, gripping the weapon tight in his right hand. He picked up a lantern in his left as Evelyn opened the door to the chamber for him. When he entered, she quickly closed it between them, leaving him alone in the darkness with his demon. That pervasive blackness nearly swallowed the light of his lantern whole. Ever since he and Evelyn had banished the spirit of Karak Nul here in this chamber, it had remained in shadow, the torches on the walls blowing out with Keldor's exorcism, never to be relit. Neither Keldor nor Evelyn had returned to this place since that fateful night. So much had gone wrong, deadly wrong, that they'd fled in fear. It was uncharacteristic of the both of them, but the evil ghost that haunted this chamber was nothing to trifle with.

Evelyn hadn't shared the full story of Skeletor's origins in her journal. There were some aspects of it that were for the two of them alone to know, the primary being that it wasn't just a transformation, but a possession. The demon known as The Nameless One had granted Keldor a great deal of power in exchange for his curse, but that was the real trick, wasn't it? It wasn't The Nameless One's curse at all, but rather one of a long-dead bounty hunter who had spent his life obsessed with entering Castle Grayskull and claiming its power for his own. It was known as the Curse of Karak Nul and Keldor's becoming Skeletor stemmed from his merger with Nul's cursed spirit. For a time, Keldor's will was no longer his own, but Nul's. For years, he was not himself. Evelyn had tried to help him many times, to bring him back to himself, but she had been mostly unsuccessful.

In those early years, Keldor had retained some small measure of control and memory of his former self, but over time Nul's presence eventually eclipsed his own, becoming so powerful that Keldor was in essence dead; lost within the recesses of his own mind. He'd spent decades as a slave to the madness and obsessions of Karak Nul, namely the spirit's fixation on gaining Castle Grayskull's power, maintaining only a slight influence over his own body's actions. Miraculously, during his imprisonment within The Fright Zone, Keldor had been able to fight his way out of his mental prison, pushing the influence of Karak Nul deep within his mind. Far from the strong magics of Tellus, which had empowered and increased the obsessive spirit's influence over him, he'd regained control, coming to know himself as Keldor once again for the first time in what felt like a lifetime. But his freedom from Nul's control didn't last. Keldor's niece Adora had helped him escape and return to Tellus and though he was free from Hordak's physical prison, he'd found that his mind was once again under siege by his own internal enemy.

From the moment he'd set foot on Tellus's surface upon his return, he'd felt the power of the planet's magics flowing through him, and with them the familiar and incredibly strong pull of Karak Nul's influence. With the discovery that Castle Grayskull had been destroyed in his time away, the shocked spirit had retreated, if only briefly. Keldor had used this opportunity to seek out his beloved Evelyn, finally ready to accept her help in returning him to his former self. She had been waiting for him to come to her, thinking that she had the answer. She'd thought that his merely giving up the power, as she had, would be enough, but his transformation had been much different than her own. Everything they tried thereafter failed. Even the Spell of Separation was not enough to expel Nul's spirit from Keldor's body. It had been housed there for far too long, his flesh having been the vehicle for Nul's obsession with Castle Grayskull for many long years. Finally, in their last desperate attempt, they had reached out to Evelyn's father, The Faceless One. Keldor shook with anger as he recalled the man's refusal. How dare he refuse? How dare he?! It was then that Evelyn made the ultimate sacrifice for her lover, stealing her father's power and adding it to her own. It had destroyed The Faceless One forever, the man once known as Nikolas Powers becoming lost to the void for all of eternity, denied eternal rest and damnation both. Now wielding more power than ever before, Evelyn had been able to violently separate Karak Nul's spirit from Keldor. They were unable to destroy it, even with their combined magics, but they had managed to imprison the foul ghost here, in Zalesia's treasure room, far below the city Keldor now called his kingdom.

However, despite the separation, Keldor could still feel the pull of Karak Nul's essence, could still feel the spirit of the long-dead warrior calling to him, begging to be free from his bondage within this very chamber. Looking down at the Soulslayer

sword in his hand, Keldor smiled. He would be happy to deny Nul his freedom, for Nul had denied Keldor that very same freedom for so long. Yes, he would destroy this spirit and finally, after decades of internal struggle, he would be free. Keldor would reach his full potential, as the Goddess had promised. He would wield the power to destroy Hordak once and for all, with or without the help of Adam and Adora, finally cementing his legacy. Stepping further into the dark room, he could feel an unnatural chill in the air. Despite the cold flesh the Sorceress of Grayskull's curse had given him, he shivered, as if the chill of the room was that of death itself. "I've come for you, Spirit," he called out, his voice echoing eerily in the empty chamber. "Come out and face your long-overdue judgement."

From the far wall came the clinking sound of a heavy chain. Flicking his eyes to where the noise had come from, Keldor saw a glow appear, dim at first, but slowly increasing in its intensity. The light soon took on the form of a human skeleton, the glowing bones surrounded by the pitch darkness of the skin around them. A cracked skull grinned at him from within the collar of a large cape, which billowed out even though there was no movement in the old air of the chamber. Keldor saw that the chain he'd heard was attached to the spirit's left wrist, dangling down nearly to the floor before connecting to the reliquary it had fastened to its end, the artifact dragging along the ground as the spirit approached. Legend said that the reliquary held the key to Castle Grayskull itself; that the spirit was forever chained to what it had obsessed over in life, now unable to use it in death. The apparition standing before him was Karak Nul himself; the evil ghost of Skeletor.

Keldor suppressed a shudder as it laughed darkly. "You, murderer of so many, are here to pass judgment on me?" The voice was low and raspy; the whisper of a dead man. The specter's darkened eye sockets suddenly flared with a red fire. "Your binding spell trapped me in this chamber for years, unable to escape. Can you imagine the hatred I feel for you?"

"Yes," Keldor replied. "It's the same hatred I have for you. But I don't care about how you feel, ghost, for today I will send you to the void."

"An ambitious claim," Nul's spirit said with a raspy laugh. "How do you plan on resisting me?"

"With this," Keldor said, holding his sword up and pointing its diamond-sharp tip at the apparition. "It is called Soulslayer. A gift of the Goddess herself, to finally bring your terror to an end."

"There is no end to my terror," the spirit replied. "I am the master of fear, and I sense it in you despite your efforts to hide your thoughts from me. I will have you as my vehicle once more, half-breed. There is no escaping me this time."

In a flash, the spirit was suddenly upon him, the cold, dead hands of the ghost of Nul grasping at Keldor with fury. Keldor swung his sword expertly as the spirit descended, but the blade merely passed through the apparition with no effect. "What?!" Keldor exclaimed.

Nul's spirit laughed once more, his hands wrapping around Keldor's throat. "I am well aware of this weapon, Keldor. Your Goddess has betrayed you. It only kills the invasive spirit after it has entered its host," the skull's jaw lowered in a grin Keldor knew all-too-well, "and not a second before."

"No!" Keldor shouted, struggling with the ghost, attempting to defend himself, but to no avail. He couldn't make any solid contact despite the spirit's own grip upon him.

"Oh, yes and now," Nul said, "you are mine once more."

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Evelyn stood outside the chamber for as long as she could stand it. It had been far too long since Keldor had entered and he had yet to return. She wasn't going to wait a minute longer. Pulling open the chamber door once again, she entered quietly, her staff held tightly in her right hand. Stepping inside, the door behind her slammed shut of its own accord, enveloping her in darkness. Her eyes beginning to adjust, she saw the embers of Keldor's torch to her right. The torch itself lay on the floor, all but extinguished. Immediately, she spoke a brief incantation and her staff began to glow, lighting up the area directly around her. The edges of the magical light succumbed to the darkness not five feet from her, unable to penetrate it further. "Keldor?" she called softly.

She continued into the chamber, holding her staff ahead of her in an attempt to light her way. Despite its glow, she still had to navigate the chamber with great care due to the light's limitations, imposed by some outside force. Evelyn remained mindful of the pedestals that held ancient artifacts littered throughout the room, as they posed a hazard to her every step. In contrast to her usual confidence, she began to feel fear enveloping her mind, much as the darkness did the room. The chamber felt cold, unnaturally so, even for its depth deep below Tellus's surface. "Keldor?" she called again, a little louder this time. In the distance, she began to hear a soft moan. Her pace quickened as she made her way toward the sound. Before long, the light of her staff shone on Keldor's armored boots and, soon after, the rest of him as she rushed to his side. He lay on his stomach, his cape obscuring

his face and head. Carefully, she placed her staff on the floor and reached out to him, using both hands to roll him over onto his back. "Keldor?" she asked again, her voice shaking. "Are you alright?"

With a suddenness that shocked her, Keldor's armored right hand shot up and grabbed her by the throat, raising her fully off the ground with incredible strength as he stood. "Remarkable," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "I would have thought that after all these years, you'd understand." Using his left hand, he pulled the cape away from his head to reveal a sight she'd hoped to never see again: a yellow-green skull dimly lit from below by the light of her staff which lay near his feet. The empty eye sockets glowed with a magical red fire as he glowered at her. Speaking slowly, he enunciated each word, to be sure that she understood. "I am not Keldor."

9.

DOOR TO ETHERIA

Randor held the Cosmic Key carefully. He'd not seen it since his rescue from Etheria's Fright Zone and, to be frank, he wasn't very happy to have to use it at all. He'd found his previous trip through its portal to be disconcerting at his age, and that had been years before. However, Randor knew that it was needed. They needed his daughter's friends with them on Tellus to help in the fight against The Horde. Hordak's emissary, a creature called Lord Draco, had already made himself known with a second Cosmic Key and had even killed Squiddish Rex, the Aquarian formerly known as Mer-Man. While Randor would be lying if he said he'd miss the aquatic monarch, Draco had proven his point. They were in danger, and with Hordak also possessing a key of his own, the invasion could happen at any moment.

"You'll be fine," his daughter-in-law Teela told him at the opened jawbridge of Castle Grayskull. "They know you, or will at least know of you. The same can't be said for me. Besides," she trailed off.

"Your place is here with Dare," he finished for her. "I'm sure I'll be alright. I'll have your father with me, after all, and he's not as prone to admitting his age as I

am," he said with a quiet laugh as he eyed Duncan, who merely shook his head lightly.

"Yeah, yeah," Duncan said with a smile. "I get that 'old man' talk enough from Teela, I don't need to hear it from you, too."

Randor grinned and said, "Your attitude has served you well, my friend. You're far spryer than I am these days. Perhaps I should have taken your advice and not gotten soft."

"You still have the soul of a warrior, Randor," Teela said. "I see it in your eyes. That's not something that leaves you."

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted, "though I can't say that our inevitable landing on the other side of the Key's portal is something that these old bones are looking forward to."

Teela turned to see Dare running up behind her. "I didn't want you to leave without being able to say goodbye," the boy said.

Lifting Dare into his arms, Randor embraced his grandson and ruffled the boy's hair. "No goodbye's," he said. "Good journey."

"Good journey, Grandfather," Dare said. Randor put him down and Duncan approached the boy, kneeling to his eye level, embracing him in his armored arms. "You too, Grandpa Duncan."

"Good journey, my boy," Duncan replied. "We love you very much and we'll see you again soon. I promise."

"I know," Dare said, full of the kind of confidence that seldom seems to survive childhood.

Releasing him, Duncan stood once more and stroked his mustache nervously. "It's time we left," he said. "Is the key still programmed by Keldor to reach both Etheria and Tellus?"

"I can only assume so," Randor said. When he pressed the sequence as he'd been instructed by Veena, the key began to give off colored lights as its forked prongs started to rotate. Within moments, a portal opened; the tunnel of light that would bring them across galaxies and dimensions to Etheria, home-base of The Horde. "Shall we?" Randor asked. With a nod, Duncan made his way to the opening, turning briefly to wave at his daughter and grandson before leaping into the unknown. Randor attached the Cosmic Key to his belt before giving them a smile of his own and jumping in after him.

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Randor was surprised at the soft landing that awaited them on Etheria. He and Duncan had just left Tellus's summer season seconds before and yet they found themselves standing nearly knee-deep in a snow drift on the other side of the portal. The former King shivered as an icy wind whipped through the forest they found themselves in. He quickly checked to see if the Cosmic Key was still secure on his belt and was happy to find it hanging there intact.

"By the Goddess!" Duncan said, cursing the cold under his breath. "I know that time passes differently on this planet, but I didn't expect to be caught in the middle of a snow storm."

Randor merely nodded, wrapping his arms around himself to keep warm. Taking in their surroundings, he saw the familiar trees of the Whispering Woods, which bore unique colored trunks different from any on their planet. Their leaves were gone however, and he quickly caught sight of a Horde scout ship skimming the treetops not more than three hundred yards ahead of them. "Down!" he cried. Both he and Duncan dropped to the snow-covered ground and hid themselves within the cold substance as best they could before the ship's occupants could see them. Mere moments later, the Horde craft roared past them and continued on. Apparently, their abruptly-made camouflage had worked. They'd been lucky.

"This lack of cover is going to get us killed," Duncan said as he stood and brushed the snow off of his armor to the best of his ability. "Wherever the rebels' base was before, it can't be in these woods now. They'd be shot like Thenurians in a public swimming pit."

"I agree," Randor said, shivering as he stood and did the same. "We need to get out of here, find some cover, and see if we can get in touch with some non-Horde locals."

"Which way?" Duncan asked.

Randor pointed at the smoke rising from the stacks littering Hordak's Fright Zone, which could be easily seen through the bare trees. "The opposite way of that."

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Within the Fright Zone itself, in the upper levels of Hordak's Temple, the leader of The Horde sat upon his throne quietly. To an observer, he would have appeared to have been in a state of peaceful meditation, but in truth he was instead laser-focused, stretching outward with his mind and feeling the many thousands more that he called his own, each of them a link in the chain of his power. Over the centuries, The Horde had spread throughout the galaxies, touching nearly every inhabited planet within this dimension. His troops had long ago secured footholds on each one, grinding them into submission, often within a single generation. Rarely did rebellious groups form, and none were as problematic as the one that called this very planet home. The winter months had regularly driven Etheria's "Great Rebellion" out of whatever base they'd had within the Whispering Woods, and this year was no different. Hordak's ships made regular runs over that location this time of year in an effort to find them, but they'd had no results thus far. Not even an old camp location could be found, as the snow masked traces of settlements from sight and the rebels weren't stupid enough to leave anything behind that the Horde sensors would pick up. Still, it wasn't their elusiveness that caused Hordak problems; the core group was actually quite small and didn't pose much of a threat on their own. For years, they'd been nothing more than troublemakers, but no more.

What caused Hordak great difficulty in recent years was the rebellion's new leader: Despara, or Adora as she called herself now. The girl had quickly risen through the rebel ranks and had spent the past several years making the members who pledged themselves to her cause into more of a threat than they'd ever been on their own. Despara knew the Horde's tactics, knew their strategies and behavior, and understood how to defeat them. She should, as she'd once been one of them; a child promising enough that Hordak himself had even adopted her as his daughter, along with all of the benefits that such a thing would entail. Despite this, she'd betrayed him, joining up with those fools in the woods. Not long after, She-Ra had appeared, blessed with immense power, much like King Grayskull had been in his day. It only made sense that she and Adora were one and the same. Hordak was no fool and he knew the power that Grayskull's bloodline held. When he first saw She-Ra's power, it recalled memories of his old foe and Hordak knew immediately that this warrior of light was secretly his adopted daughter.

Once Despara had stolen the Comic Key from him, he'd been hobbled in his attempts to search her out, much less expand Horde territory. Unable to locate the girl, Hordak knew that he'd need another key to bring his plans to fruition. He'd had the foresight to harvest her blood. He'd also congratulated himself for having had the wherewithal at the time to keep the Cosmic Key's maker, a Thenurian named

Gwildor, alive. The locksmith and inventor had been shuttled off to a prison planet deep in the Tri-Solar System, but he'd been well cared for over the years as insurance for just such a need. The rebellion had managed to free the creature, but not before Hordak had forced him to make two more Cosmic Keys for The Horde. Now, finding his daughter didn't matter, except as a matter of pride. He wouldn't have to worry about finding her for much longer. He'd had a report the previous day that the girl had activated her key. Able to trace her signal, he knew that she'd gone home to Alpha Prime, the planet known to its inhabitants as Tellus. He'd be there soon enough for his own purposes and knew that their meeting face-to-face once again was inevitable.

Sensing a presence outside of the throne room door, Hordak opened his eyes. "Enter," he said. Lord Draco stepped through and kneeled before him. The guards on either side of the galactic despot remained motionless, but ever ready; twin statues of power dedicated to their leader and his safety. "What is it, Draco?" he asked.

"Another report of a portal opened by the girl's key, My Lord," Draco said, raising his head to meet the eyes of his master. "This time its exit was here, in the Whispering Woods."

"She's returned home already?" Hordak asked. "Curious. I'd expected her to remain on Alpha Prime for a bit longer. You said that you didn't see her there with her family?"

"Her whereabouts were unknown at the time of my visit, Lord Hordak, as was the location of her brother Adam."

"Again, curious. What could she be up to?"

"It's not like to you be so inquisitive, My Lord," Draco replied.

"No. It's not," he admitted. "After thousands of years, many of those years spent on multiple worlds, few beings' actions are unpredictable to me. Despite that, Despara somehow continues to confound me. Her methods, they continually elude me," he confessed. "It's infuriating."

"I understand," Draco said.

"I don't think you do. You have been with The Horde for a long time, Emissary, but your lifespan is but a blink of an eye compared to mine." He paused before motioning for his visitor to leave. "Go. Investigate the readings in the Whispering Woods and see what you find. Take Catra with you."

"Yes, Master," Draco replied. The man in black stood and began to turn, but Hordak held up his gloved hand, causing him to come to a sudden stop.

The Horde leader drummed his fingers on the arm of his throne in contemplation for a long moment before speaking. "Despara is difficult for me to read," he began. "It's time that I admitted that. There is someone else who may be better suited to it, however. Someone who has spent much more time with her."

Realizing who his master meant, the emissary responded, "You mean to free her then, Milord?"

"Perhaps," Hordak replied cautiously. "That remains to be seen. In either case, it's about time I paid our old friend Shadow Weaver a visit."

10.

CURSED

Evelyn struggled with Skeletor, her attacker's grip eventually loosening enough for her to speak. "Em'morph'yawa'teg!" she shouted, the ancient word hurling Skeletor away from her as she landed on her feet gracefully. Reaching out with her right hand, she called her staff to it. It flew up instantly and snapped into her grip. "I've known who you are for some time, Ghost. I'm not an idiot." The Sorceress of Zalesia grimaced with anger. "It wasn't you I was talking to." Skeletor rushed her, but she flew upward, hovering above him. "Keldor!" she called again. "Hear me!"

"He hears nothing now, woman," Skeletor said angrily, the magical fires within his empty eye sockets blazing red.

"We'll see. Keldor, enim'thiw elos'eroj dnib!" she spoke the words hurriedly, but she made sure to hit every syllable perfectly nonetheless. To err in the old tongue could mean death, for without knowing the words one misspoke, there would be no undoing the spell they wove. "Rehthgot secroph'ephil ruo'nioj!"

"It's no use, Evelyn," Skeletor said in his wraith-like voice. "You've lost. You—" he trailed off, the red flames in his eyes suddenly extinguished. Evelyn

watched closely as the seemingly lifeless creature collapsed back to the ground in a heap.

Evelyn floated back down cautiously, keeping her eyes riveted on Skeletor's motionless form as she searched for any sign of movement. "Won'nekawa," she commanded. Skeletor's body began to move its extremities; his fingers and feet twitching for several long moments before he suddenly bolted upright into a sitting position. He reached up with both hands and grasped his yellow/green skull, moaning in extreme pain. "The pain will fade, my love," she told him.

"What," he began, struggling to think clearly, "what did you do to me?" he asked, his words still rasping like a ghostly echo. The voice of Keldor, which she'd always found so comforting, was gone, this time forever.

"I used a spell, just like you said," she replied, a sadness in her voice that she couldn't hide. Evelyn snapped her fingers and the line of torches that surrounded the room reignited with hot flames. The spirit's dampening hold over the chamber had been ended.

"That wasn't the spell I spoke of. The spell that would calm the spirit. That was," he paused, gasping, "something else."

"You're right," she said. "It was. The old spell never worked that well. You only thought it did. Even in those early days, I saw Karak Nul's influence on you, although you were blind to it. This spell is something different. Something I discovered shortly before the last time I brought you here. I didn't think I'd ever need to use it."

"How does it work?" he asked, beginning to feel like himself once more, albeit slowly.

"Your lifeforce, your soul, is now bound to my own," she answered. "As long as my body lives, you will remain in control of your own. Fully in control," she emphasized.

"Why didn't you do it before then?" Keldor inquired. "Before we stole your father's power? He could have lived."

She thought for only a moment before answering. "Because I didn't want Skeletor with Keldor's mind. I wanted Keldor. I wanted you. I was willing to sacrifice anything for that, just as you were willing to risk becoming Skeletor again in order to defeat Hordak."

"It wasn't intentional," he said, regaining his footing with her help. "I intended to destroy the spirit, but he overtook me." He didn't tell her why the sword had failed. She had succeeded far beyond his wildest imaginings. If possessed, he'd expected only a moment's clarity to tell her of the sword's purpose. Instead, he had his mind back completely. Now, even with the voice of Nul hidden so far within him that he couldn't hear it, Keldor could feel the power that surged within him once more. The power of Skeletor. Combined with the rejuvenated planet's own magics, which flowed through him like a conduit, he was more powerful now than he'd ever been, than he'd ever needed to be. With the invasion of The Horde imminent, he needed that power. He knew that now. In that moment, he promised himself that he would tell Evelyn of the sword's purpose in time, but not yet. Not when he could use this power to his advantage. "Still, this turn of events may be of benefit to us all," he reasoned.

"Not all of us," she countered. "I'd hoped to never see that skull again."

"It's temporary," he replied. "In the meantime, I will use Nul's power to my advantage."

"It's not temporary, Keldor," she said. "We can't use my father's power to separate you again. I exhausted it the first time, taking on his curse in the process. When I die, I'm fated to become the new Faceless One, and you are now doomed to remain Skeletor forever. We're both cursed, my love. From now until the end of days."

Keldor knew that the sword could save him. He knew he should tell her, but he couldn't, not when there was no saving her from her own damnation. He couldn't tell her now; not until they'd won. Then, when the war was over, he'd dedicate himself to finding a way to return the favor and save her, to somehow break her curse. "Thank you," he said instead, "for saving me."

"I'd already given up my eternal rest to be with you again, Keldor. What's one more sacrifice?" She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. "Though I'll miss your handsome face." Letting go, she pulled away once more. "So where do we go from here?" she asked.

"A strange benefit of this experience," Keldor began as he looked away, to the rear of the chamber, "is that Nul learned every secret of this chamber during his imprisonment here. With his spirit inside of me once again, I now know those secrets also." He walked toward what appeared to be a bare wall. "Like this one." With a gesture, the wall unlocked and a hidden door opened, revealing the most precious of Zalesia's artifacts: its ancient armory.

"Amazing," she said. "I had no idea that this was here."

"Apparently, our home still has secrets," he replied, "even from you. This door hasn't been opened in a thousand years." There were several armors on display, but Keldor had two particular sets in mind. He first approached one he'd chosen for Evelyn; a set of purple and silver armor attached to a black bodysuit. The ram-headed symbol of Havok was broadly woven across its chest, resembling the Ram Stone that he remembered from an old attempt to defeat He-Man. "The armor of a priestess of Havok," he said. "Now, it is yours."

"Does it have any special magics?" she asked.

"It will increase your power," he answered. "How much, I do not know."

"Only one way to find out," she said. Stripping down, she donned the sleek Havokian bodysuit and armor, yet felt nothing. "Well?" she asked. "I feel no magic."

He approached and pressed gently on her left gauntlet, revealing a button she hadn't even noticed, for it was interwoven into the suit itself. Upon pressing it, the suit's sculpted lines began to light up with a bright glow. "Not magic," he corrected. "Technology; old technology from the Great War that ended the First Age. If Karak Nul is right, then this armor, sleek and futuristic as it may seem, is actually thousands of years old, older even than the so-called First Ones, the Snake Men."

"That's ridiculous," she scoffed.

"So's a talking skull," he said dryly, "yet here I am." His jaw lowered in what she'd long ago come to know as a grin.

"And for you?" she asked. "I'm sure you've picked out a formidable armor for yourself."

"Naturally," he said. Removing the armor that he currently wore, he approached another set done up in black. He slipped on the body suit and the armor that covered it, snapping the latter into place around his chest and shoulders, forearms, and lower legs. The final piece was a geometric black helmet, which made for a tight fit even over his bare skull. It was less a helmet really than a mask that framed his boned face in obsidian-like armor. Upon a closer look, one would see that the armor was in fact not a pure black, but was sparkled with tiny pinpoints that made the suit resemble the stars of the night sky. "The armor of Standor," he said.

"The architect of the universe?" she asked.

He laughed. "Only the gods made the universe, but legends say that Standor was the first wizard, who gifted magic to the creatures of the world. Then again, even that is probably untrue. Still, there is great power contained within this suit." Sheathing his sword on his new armor, he pressed a button on his own left gauntlet and the suit hummed to life for the first time in eons. "That, combined with his magic, was enough to convince other men that he was a god, himself," he continued, "for a time. And now that same power belongs to me. It, in combination with the power of Karak Nul, will make me unstoppable. I'll crush Draco beneath my boot and, when that worm is dead, I'll do the same to Hordak, with or without the twins."

"And after Hordak?" Evelyn asked, sounding worried. It had been some time since she'd heard him ramble on about power, and it frightened her.

"First things first," he replied, his empty eye sockets glowing once more. "Although you and I know that I am in control, from this point on, I am Skeletor once more. I learned during my time on Etheria that I am still remembered within the ranks of the Horde. The name 'Skeletor' still commands fear amongst them. We'll use that to our advantage as well."

"It sounds like you have it all worked out," she said.

"Of course not," he admitted, "but we need every advantage that we can get."

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Walking amongst his people, Skeletor felt their eyes upon him; boring into him. They of course recognized their queen, as Evelyn matched his pace beside him. He could see the confusion written upon their many faces. The Gar people were, at their most basic nature, a savage race. Despite generations of scientific knowledge that rivaled any other race on Tellus, they were primarily known as warriors, and it had been many long years since they'd had a war to fight as a united race. No longer scattered to the four winds, the Gar now called Zalesia home and their king, Keldor, was held in high regard. He'd come to them shortly after returning the lifeless body of Kira 'Na to her people, which he'd preserved with his magic until he'd been able to regain control over his mind. He couldn't have any distractions until that was accomplished, but he'd kept his promise soon afterward. Upon leaving the Dytherian tribe, he'd then made his way to the nearby mountains that the Gar had called home. The first time the blue race of humanoids had seen him, he'd already been separated from the ghost of Skeletor, but his armored helmet

had born a green skull that evoked his cursed self. It had always made for a powerful symbol and he'd purposely worn the skulled helmet while he reclaimed a kingdom from the sands before the Gars' very eyes. Now they saw that symbol again, though this time it was walking amongst them, living and breathing. While the once nomadic race revered Keldor, the skull of Skeletor was almost like the face of god to them; a symbol of their deliverer; their leader; their king.

Approaching his throne, Skeletor turned and sat upon it, looking out over a crowd that had excitedly followed him through the streets and all the way into the throne room. The clamor of their animated conversations was growing loud enough that it made it difficult for him to hear Evelyn speaking, even though she sat right beside him on a throne of her own. He turned to her and she mouthed, "Say something."

Raising his black-gloved hand in a call for silence, the room quickly hushed, their eyes once again staring upon his skulled visage in awe and wonder. "War," he began, his voice cool and raspy. "The Gar hold many things dear, but few as dear as war," he paused, "and a noble death." He lowered his hand and tapped his fingers lightly upon the arm of his throne. "In my life, I have made many sacrifices. Some of those sacrifices were made for you, for the Gar. This," he indicated his yellow/green skull, "is but one. I ruled you as Keldor. I rule you now as Skeletor," he paused, "and I need your help." The room's ceiling, painted in a mosaic of stars and planets, glowed gently in the torchlight. Looking up, he directed the eyes of the crowd to it. "My people, war is coming. My old enemy, the intergalactic despot Hordak, will soon descend from the stars in an effort to take this world and destroy it. We will not allow this to happen. I know that this is not the home world of the Gar, but it is your home now. I will defend it. I will sacrifice for it. Will you?"

"We would die for Tellus!" one Gar shouted. "We would die for King Skeletor!"

Shouts of agreement filled the throne room as Skeletor again raised his hand for silence. "There is no doubt that many of you will, as will many of other races who call different kingdoms home. The Horde is no minor threat, I assure you, and they are coming. There will be no attempt at negotiations. There will be only war and glorious death. Follow me, as you have these past years, and I will bring you to victory. I will bring the Gar respect on this world such as they have never before experienced."

"Will you?" a gravel-like mechanical voice from the crowd said, causing a hush to fall over the others. The sound of heavily armored steps filled the chamber as the owner of the voice stepped forward, his robotic right arm twitching and

buzzing as he stretched and popped his neck. The Gar who'd spoken wore a metal helmet upon his head. His face, which bore a strange green complexion, was scarred and burned; his lower jaw replaced with a metal one bearing the look of a steel trap. "You've never been good at keeping your word."

Skeletor leaned forward as he now saw the mysterious visitor in full view. "Kronis," he said quietly, quickly adding, "my old friend."

"The name's Trap Jaw and you know it," the man said with a dry laugh. "Kronis is dead. You saw to that years ago when you disfigured me, so don't play at being my friend by using my old name now." The man turned and looked at his robotic arm for a moment before returning his eyes to the royal couple. "Preternian pits," he swore, "I've been Trap Jaw for longer now than I was this Kronis you speak of."

"Why are you here?" Evelyn asked pointedly, her grip tightening on her magical staff in preparation for whatever came next.

Trap Jaw glanced at the crowd around him before looking back to Skeletor and Evelyn. "Perhaps we should speak without the sycophants present," he said, his mechanical arm indicating those behind him, "as old friends," he added sardonically. Skeletor nodded, commanding the others to leave. It wasn't until the room was empty that Trap Jaw spoke again. "You know, I abandoned Tellus altogether after I left Snake Mountain," he began. "You'd gone more insane than usual and I'd finally lost all faith in you. I knew you'd never become king of Eternia, and that you'd never gain any power from Grayskull either, so I left. Eventually, we all did," he looked to Evelyn before adding, "though some found it harder to stay away, it seems. Must be your endless charm," he scoffed. "Anyway, I certainly didn't want you coming after me, so I looked up Tri-Klops and we booked passage off the planet, took up some mercenary work. He's dead, by the way," Trap Jaw added, almost as an afterthought, "for some years now. I know he was your friend back in the early days, much as I was, so I thought you should know."

"Do you have a point?" Skeletor asked.

Trap Jaw grimaced, his upper lip scrunching up in anger before it faded back into a passive expression. "Cold-hearted as always, I see," he said. "Yes, I have a point. It took a while, but even off-world, rumors from home had a way of finding their way to me. I heard you'd become Keldor again somehow and that you were a king, even if it wasn't over the kingdom you'd originally wanted. I looked up archived holo-footage and saw that it was true, seeing your face again for the first time in decades. I thought it was funny at first, to be honest, but in the end, I found that I was actually happy for you, despite everything that had happened between

us. I even made my way here, to tell you as much." Trap Jaw narrowed his eyes at Skeletor and tilted his head slightly. "Obviously, you can only imagine how I feel having come all this way only to see you with that damned skull again." He took a step closer to the throne and sneered. "I'd come to shake your hand as a warrior," he paused, "and as an old friend. Instead," he raised his robotic arm and with the whirring of gears and electronics, it transformed into a formidable laser cannon, which he quickly leveled at the Zalesian king, "I suppose I'll just have to satisfy myself with finally killing you." His upper lip raised in a smile as he fired.

11.

A ROLE TO PLAY

Dare made his way deeper into Castle Grayskull as his mother and Veena spoke. He could hear them talking behind him, but he wasn't really paying attention. There was far too much to see here to spend his time listening to adults. Veena was saying something about how well-behaved he was, to which his mother agreed. "Small talk," his mother called it. He just thought it was boring. Besides, he suspected that they wouldn't really begin talking about anything important until he was out of earshot. That was usually how it worked when his parents talked to important people. Mekaneck was walking behind him, trying to keep an eye on him, but his parents' friend was often distracted by the sights of the castle, himself. Dare was just as intrigued by them, of course, but not enough to keep him from moving on to the next room, and then the next one after that. On and on, he continued until he found a staircase, neatly tucked into the corner of a rather nondescript room, empty of anything else. Thinking that perhaps its stairs led to one of the parapets he'd seen from outside, he began to climb.

"Dare, slow down," Mekaneck called after him. "You shouldn't be wandering so far on your own. We have no idea of knowing what we might find hidden away in here."

"Exactly!" the boy shouted back at Mekaneck, who was further down the spiral stairs and just out of sight. "Just keep up, I'm not going much farther."

"What if we can't find our way back?" Mekaneck asked.

"We'll find our way back, silly," Dare replied. "We haven't even gone that far, Orius. It just seems like it because of the magic," he explained. He doubted the man would understand, however. Most adults didn't see the world the way that he did. "We've only really gone a room over."

"How can you know that?" Mekaneck asked him, finally catching up to the child.

"I don't know," Dare said. "I just do. You can see all kinds of things with your eyes that normal people can't, right?"

Mekaneck tilted his head slightly out of curiosity, wondering what the boy was getting at. "Yeah, but, what does that have to do with—"

"Well, I can too," Dare interjected. "I've always been able to."

Hearing the words, Mekaneck felt a pang of concern. "I knew that you were sensitive to magic, but I had no idea that you had that kind of ability. Do your parents know?"

"I guess," Dare replied. "I try not to talk about it much."

"Why not?"

"Because it used to scare my mother when I was little," he said.

"You're still little," Mekaneck said with a smile, despite his growing concerns.

"My body's little, but my mind is big," the boy quipped.

"Oh yeah, then where are we going?" Mekaneck asked.

"Up," Dare said simply, an impish grin on his face. "I can feel something up there. I don't know what it is, but I want to find out. Besides, if it wasn't safe, Veena would let us go there." He turned and began climbing the steps in haste, causing Mekaneck to curse under his breath as he followed.

• • •

"Where is Dare?" Teela asked, suddenly all too aware that, during her conversation with the Goddess, she'd lost track of him.

"Don't worry. He's only been gone a moment," Veena replied. "Built by a powerful wizard, the magic of the castle can sometimes be confusing and disorienting to those not attuned to it, especially when it comes to the passage of time."

"But he's safe?" Teela asked.

"He's with Orius," Veena said noncommittally. "Dare is a wonderful boy, and more powerful than you realize."

"I know. His power makes me fear for him at times," Teela admitted. "He can tap into things, magics of this world, that he doesn't fully understand."

"No mortal can fully understand magic," Veena corrected. "Not truly. Dare is very important to me, Teela. More than you will ever know. I don't want the power he possesses to worry you. It was given to him for a reason, which will reveal itself in time."

"It's not the power itself that worries me," Teela explained, "it's his inquisitive and fearless nature. I'm afraid that one day he'll come face to face with something dangerous and not be cautious enough to know that he needs to step away, that he'll head right for it."

"That is the worry of all mothers," Veena replied. "I remember the trouble my own son would get into, many years ago." She lowered her head at the memory before meeting Teela's eyes once more. "It is an interesting name, 'Dare.' How did you come to choose it?"

"Adam and I dared to hope for a better world, a peaceful world after the planet was healed. It seemed an appropriate name for our son," she replied. "We had no idea how much it would suit his personality."

• • •

"C'mon, Orius, you're too slow," Dare called down the steps at Mekaneck.

The Captain of the Royal Guard slowed briefly to catch his breath. He wasn't as young as he used to be and years of peace had made his body a little softer; a

little slower. He'd been a fine warrior in his younger days, but ever since he'd been disabled on the battlefield he'd developed a love for tech that far superseded any desire to train. He'd kept up with it during the war with Skeletor, that went without saying, but now they were at peace and his desire to lift and run and fight had begun to wane. He hadn't had to work as hard, and he hadn't. By no means was he in bad shape, but in this moment, breathing heavily on an inner stairwell of Castle Grayskull, in chase of a prince that was faster than he was, Mekaneck wished that he'd remained half as disciplined as Teela had. "My Prince, wait," he called up, starting back up the steps.

After what felt like another dozen turns leading upward, he came to the top of the parapet, which is where he'd expected they were headed. Dare was standing at the edge, looking out over the plains and fields that had once been a barren wasteland at the edge of the Dark Hemisphere. Seeing it from this height, healthy and renewed, gave Mekaneck an appreciation of the area's beauty that he'd never had before. He approached Dare and placed his right hand on the young prince's left shoulder. "It didn't always look like this," he explained. "Before you were born, half of the planet was nearly destroyed; a desolate place that no good man or woman tried to make a home of. That half, the Dark Hemisphere, was always known as a haven for evil."

"But my father fixed it?" Dare asked. He'd heard the story, but without having seen the planet as it had been prior, he'd never had the context to fully understand it.

"Yes," Mekaneck said. "He took the last vestiges of the power of Grayskull, the power that had made him He-Man, and used it to heal the planet. He sacrificed his strength, his god-like abilities, for the good of the world. That's the kind of man your father is."

"A good one," Dare replied.

"A good one," Mekaneck agreed. "So, did you find what you were looking for?" he asked, referring to what the boy had said earlier about 'feeling something.'

"Not really," Dare replied. "Just a good view."

When the prince backed away suddenly, Mekaneck pulled his hand away from his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked, concerned. Dare had gone white as a ghost and his eyes widened as he looked out over the parapet's walls.

"I can see it," Dare said. "I can see the way it was before. Fire and lava, barren ground without a single blade of grass, as far as I can see to the left. Green

and lush to the right." He blinked repeatedly before shaking his head. "It's gone now."

"Are you alright?" Mekaneck asked.

Dare nodded vigorously. "I'm OK, Orius. I see things, like I said before. It happens like this sometimes. It's been happening more lately. It's alright though because my mother hasn't noticed. She's been too busy."

"Why don't we get you back to your mother and Veena?" an increasingly concerned Mekaneck said, leading the boy back toward the stairwell.

Dare began to walk with him, but stopped a few feet shy of the steps. "Wait," he said. "Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Mekaneck asked.

"Something," Dare began, feeling along the waist-high stone wall with his hands. "Something right here."

"Look, Dare," he paused, "we'd better get back."

"Not yet," the prince insisted. "I've found something." In front of them was a block with a small engraving, etched with gold. It was a symbol that Mekaneck had never seen before. The first thing he noticed was an ouroboros: a snake eating itself in a perfect circle. That alone was not unusual, however contained within the ouroboros was a carving of a ram's head, not unlike the ramstone, and spreading out from the sides of the snake were wings; the wings of a falcon. It was a symbol comprising the animal forms of all three gods, he realized. Serpos, Havok, and Zoar, all united. What could it mean?

"Dare, don't," he began, but the boy pressed on the symbol before he could finish. The stone that it was etched into shifted and slid back. The two of them stepped back as a hidden panel opened, revealing a small chamber. It was too small to enter, but within it stood a pedestal which bore the weight of a glowing blue orb that swirled and pulsated with power. The pedestal itself was carved with ancient symbols older than anything Mekaneck recognized, perhaps pre-dating recorded history altogether. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Mekaneck said. "What do you think it is?"

"I don't 'think' it's anything," Dare replied. "I know what it is. It's the power of Grayskull. What's left of it, anyway. Veena must have stored it here, all those years ago when King Grayskull died. Orius, this is what my father was tapping into whenever he became He-Man."

"Don't be silly," Mekaneck said. "There's no way to know that." He felt a bead of sweat slide down his back as he looked at the orb. It appeared as if it was pulsating, a living, breathing thing. The very sight of it unnerved him. He knew in his heart that this thing before them was not meant to be seen by mortal eyes. They needed to leave. Now.

"It's not going to hurt us," Dare said. "Watch." With that one simple word, the young prince reached out and touched it before Mekaneck could act. With an instantaneous and nearly-blinding flash, Dare was flung backward into Mekaneck, who fell to his back as he caught the boy, his arms wrapping tightly around the prince in an effort to keep him safe. He held the child as his photoreceptors recalibrated, and when they had, he looked back at the chamber. The orb was gone.

"Dare?" Mekaneck asked, rolling over and lying the child on his back. He'd tried to stop him, but it was too late. The boy's eyes remained closed. "Dare?!" he yelled. Mekaneck felt tears welling up in his panic, something they'd not done since his accident. He shook the child, but failed to wake him up. "Dare!"

* * *

Teela felt a cold chill run through her as Mekaneck bolted into the chamber she stood within, Veena at her side. Tears streamed down the man's face, her child held lifeless in his arms. "What happened?!" she cried.

"I told him not to touch it," Mekaneck said, gasping. "I tried to keep him safe. I told him not to."

Rushing to her boy, Teela reached for him and Mekaneck handed him over immediately, glancing away from her as he did so. He couldn't bear to look his queen in the eye. "I told him," he repeated quietly.

Turning toward Veena, Teela seethed. "You said he was safe!"

"I didn't," she said. "I told you that he was with Orius."

"But he'd dead!" Teela shouted. "What happened?!"

Tilting her head to the side, the goddess resembled a confused bird, not understanding Teela's hysteria. "He's not dead, Teela. He merely sleeps." Veena

approached her and placed her hand on the boy's head. "See?" she asked. "He remains warm. His pulse is steady. Check him yourself if you do not believe me."

Teela quickly grasped her son's wrist and felt the rhythmic pumping of blood through his veins. Feeling relieved, but nonetheless angry, she turned back to Mekaneck. "What happened?"

"We went up to one of the parapets," the man said breathlessly. "He found something in the wall, sensed it. It was some type of orb. He touched it before I could stop him. I'm sorry," he panted. "I'm so sorry."

Turning back to the goddess, Teela looked the woman in the eyes as she held her son close against her. "What was it?" she asked.

"The power of Grayskull," Veena answered, "placed there by me a millennium ago and now discovered by Grayskull's heir, as it was destined to be."

"You mean that you knew this would happen?" Teela asked accusingly.

"Of course," Veena replied. "Dare has a role to play in current events, much as we all do."

"But what's happened to him?" Teela said. "Will he be alright?"

"He will be fine," Veena answered, "provided he finds his guide quickly. I have no doubt that he will. He is very much attuned to the magics around him."

"Guide?" the queen repeated.

"Yes," Veena said with a nod. "The one who will show him the way back."

"Back from what?" Teela asked.

The goddess placed her hand on the boy's head lovingly. "Back from the Everdream."

12.

REUNIONS

Skeletor raised his hand as Trap Jaw fired, using it to absorb the incoming blast with little effort. "That's not possible," his attacker said, furrowing his brow. "My upgrades should be more than enough for you."

The skull-faced king stood and made his way toward his old crony. Before Skeletor could reply, Trap Jaw's arm shifted once again, this time forming a large mechanical claw which he swung at his former master with all the force he could manage. Skeletor ducked, the claw just barely missing the top of his newly acquired helmet. Standing upright, Zalesia's king thrust his right palm outward, sending Trap Jaw backward with a blast of magic. The mercenary skidded along the floor of the throne room on his back before rolling into a standing position.

"Stop!" Skeletor commanded, his palm still raised in a halting gesture. "There is no need for this battle," he said. "The power I wield is greater than any I've had before. Despite that, I assure you that my mind is clear. Evelyn has seen to it that I, Keldor, remain in control. I am Skeletor in name only."

"How?" Trap Jaw asked, gasping to regain the breath that had been knocked out of him. "How can I believe that?"

"Trust me," Skeletor replied, causing the cyborg to laugh nervously.

"I trust her," he finally said, indicating Evelyn. "Is this true?" he asked her.

"For as long as I live, yes," she confirmed. "The spirit within him is held at bay until my death."

"He'd better keep you protected then," Trap Jaw said.

"I can protect myself just fine, thank you," she replied. "So, what now, Trap Jaw? You came here to either see Keldor or assassinate Skeletor. He's now both. Where do we stand?"

"As always, I stand with myself," he answered defiantly, "but what's this about Hordak? Is he really bringing his army here?"

"Yes," Skeletor said, "and we could use your help."

"Why would I care about this planet?" Trap Jaw asked. "I've made a home on my ship. This world means little to me."

"Not even your ship can protect you from Hordak," Skeletor replied. "He means to not only destroy this world, but to unmake all of reality."

"Can he do that?"

"I believe so, yes," the sorcerer responded. "We are all in danger."

"Then in the interest of self-preservation, I stand with you." The mercenary reached his intact left arm toward Skeletor, who gripped it at the forearm, a Gar tradition, much as he had so many long years ago, when the two were friends. "It'll be just like old times," the man said.

"Us against impossible numbers?" Skeletor replied.

"Exactly," Trap Jaw said. "And we'll win, just like we did then." They let go and the mercenary gazed at him curiously. "It's strange, you know; talking to you like you're Keldor while you look like a corpse again. Still, it's good to have you back."

"It is good to see you, misunderstandings aside," Skeletor said. "Now we just have to figure where we can work you into our battle plans."

• • •

"The last time I was here, this was all just sand, apart from your temple," Trap Jaw said as he and Evelyn walked the streets of Zalesia.

"Skeletor raised it from the sands with his magic," she explained. "Now that the planet's balance has been restored, we can both tap into its magics more than ever before. Skeletor has always been powerful, but now he's likely the most powerful sorcerer in the world."

"I of course saw the news about the Dark Hemisphere being healed, but out in the far reaches of the galaxy, we weren't really told how it happened," Trap Jaw said.

"He-Man sacrificed his power to restore Tellus to its original state," she replied.

Trap Jaw's interest peaked. "I'd heard that He-Man was no more. Didn't really believe it. Why haven't you taken the world for yourselves?"

Evelyn smiled thinly. "It's a long story. Longer than I care to get into here. The condensed version is that we've made peace with Eternia. Keldor entered into an agreement with the other kingdoms. So long as he remained on the Council of Kings, a governing body of leaders from around the globe, he would remain peaceful."

Trap Jaw shook his head. "I understand that he had his kingdom, even if it wasn't the one he wanted, but you're telling me that he didn't crave anything more than that?" He scoffed. "That doesn't sound like the Keldor I knew."

"He's mellowed in his old age," she quipped.

"That doesn't sound like him either," Trap Jaw replied, his tone serious. "I'm disappointed."

"We have more than we need here," Evelyn said.

"Hmmm," Trap Jaw mused, "judging from the riches I see around me, I'd say that you're right. What of the other warriors he once had at his side? Beast Man, Mer-Man and the rest?"

"Most made their own way, much as you and I once did," she replied. "Mer-Man was also a sitting member of the Council of Kings, actually, but he was recently killed by Hordak's emissary."

"No great loss there," Trap Jaw said. "I never could stand that creature. His stink was worse than Beast Man's."

"Still, soon enough he won't be the only casualty, I'm afraid," Evelyn replied. "Hordak's forces will be here before long, and then the entire planet will be at war."

"Sounds like a good opportunity for someone like me to make a handsome profit."

"Only if we succeed and you live to spend it," she replied.

The two of them stopped near the entrance of the temple. "As you said before, you left Skeletor," he began. "You'd finally wizened up to what he was. So why did you return to him?"

Evelyn paused a moment before answering. "Skeletor spent nearly a year, Tellus time, imprisoned by Hordak on Etheria. The Fright Zone is unique in that magic is forbidden there, blocked by a device of Hordak's. Hordak uses it to protect himself, but the absence of magic had the unintended side-effect of allowing Keldor to regain control of his mind," she explained. "When he returned from Etheria, he was," she pursed her lips, searching for the correct word, "changed. I then helped him restore his true self."

"And now he's betrayed you and become Skeletor again," Trap Jaw said. It wasn't a question.

"It wasn't intentional," she admitted, "but we're making the best of it."

"But by tying your life force to his, you've doomed yourself," Trap Jaw replied.

"It doesn't matter." Evelyn studied the ram-headed architecture of the temple before them and remembered the ghost-like apparition that had once been her father. "I was already doomed, anyway."

• • •

A dimension away, Hordak made his way into the lower depths of Beast Island. The island was where the Horde held the prisoners that Hordak wanted to keep close, though it was more dungeon than prison. He had more traditional prisons placed all throughout the galaxies, but Beast Island housed the most outspoken dissidents against him; those he couldn't afford to have in contact with

other, more impressionable captives. That was what made this particular prisoner, the one he was on his way to see, unique. Unlike the others, she was wholly dedicated to him. However, she had failed him and that was a grave offense considering that her failure had cost him Despara. His adopted daughter had been a great warrior and was a shining example of what the Horde represented: power, strength, and discipline. Now, she'd taken those skills to the Great Rebellion and Hordak blamed Shadow Weaver for that fact.

Shadow Weaver had been soft on their adopted daughter, going so far as to give her the choice to either stay or abandon The Horde, as Hordak had learned. That was a choice that no creature should ever be given, especially his own daughter. He'd had no choice but to punish Shadow Weaver, if only to save face. He hated the thought of looking weak. The red witch had grown complacent during her training of the girl in those final years. She'd begun to believe that her adopted child would never turn. Hordak had made the same mistake, though he was loath to admit it. Shadow Weaver's folly was that the girl had openly voiced her doubts to her, and yet she'd not told Hordak of her interactions with the traitor until it was all over, not until Despara had declared herself "Adora of the house of Randor" and betrayed them all. The blind eye that Shadow Weaver had turned to their daughter was no longer a simple turn of phrase. The literal blinding of her right eye had been her punishment, along with her banishment here; the island she'd once called her home now her prison.

It had been several years now since Hordak had seen his former right hand, her place in the Horde hierarchy now being filled by Lord Draco, who'd been pining after it for years anyway. The Horde leader would be lying if he didn't say he missed Shadow Weaver's usual wisdom, however. Draco could be a bit impulsive at times, and that wasn't something Hordak needed when the time of his ultimate victory was so close, and so potentially fragile. Still, the woman's punishment had been necessary and he was curious to see how she'd fared. Beast Island was no normal prison. It was, in many ways, one of the vilest places in the known systems.

He continued unescorted. Regardless of The Horde's backstabbing nature, he knew that none would dare to attack him openly, and so he made his way into the lowest level alone, seeking out its single occupied cell. Seeing the red-robed woman lying motionless on her cot, he rapped on the metal bars with his armored hand. No spell was needed to reinforce the bars, as Shadow Weaver's magic was now quite useless here in the Fright Zone. He'd seen to that as soon as he'd learned of her negligence. "Hello, Shadow Weaver," he said simply.

With a start, the red witch sat up, her one good eye glowing fiercely. She ran to the bars in such a rush that she slammed into them. Hordak calmly stepped

back out of her reach as she thrust toward him with both arms, her long, sharp fingernails grasping toward him. "Master!" she cried, her voice a chilling hiss. "Master, you have come for me!"

"I've merely come to talk," he replied.

Her red robe was in tatters, the grime it had accumulated over the years giving it a much darker appearance. Patches of pale green skin could be seen through its many moth-eaten holes. Her robe's state of disrepair, with its frayed edges and trailing loose threads, made her look quite pitiful. No longer able to hover, Shadow Weaver instead stood on the toes of her bare feet, filthy with the grit of the prison floor. Dropping to her knees, she pleaded, "Please, Hordak. I know that you do not forgive, and so I do not ask forgiveness, I ask only for the chance to prove myself to you. To prove my unwavering loyalty to the new god!"

"It has wavered before," he said simply.

"True! I had a moment of weakness!" she cried. "In all my countless years serving you, I had but one moment of weakness, Hordak! Even when you were imprisoned in the realm of Despondos, I did not falter! My caring for the girl was misguided, I know that now."

"Do you?"

"Yes!" She raised her right hand to her hood, pulling it back to reveal wild, unkempt raven hair and her blind right eye, scarred over. Pulling her mouth covering down, she revealed quivering lips. "And I have paid for that, Lord Hordak. I've paid for that. Surely you wouldn't be here if you did not agree."

The Horde leader walked closer to the cell, gently grasping her face in his armored right hand as she knelt. "You know how the girl thinks," he said. "More than I ever could. I admit that. You know her better than anyone."

"Yes!" she shrieked. "Yes, I know her!"

"Then you know what must be done," he said.

"I will destroy her!" Shadow Weaver replied hurriedly. "I will make her regret her choice. Just as I raised her from a crying whelp into a powerful woman, I will take her power; take her life!"

Slowly, but firmly, he began to squeeze. "And you will not fail me again." It was not a question, but rather a statement.

Unable to speak, his hand tight around her mouth, Shadow Weaver shook her head vigorously. Loosening his grip, Hordak gently touched her blind eye, using his own unimpeded magic to heal the scarred tissue. He'd learned long ago that kindness could be useful on occasion, especially when it came to the art of manipulation. When he finally withdrew his hand, she sobbed, now fully restored. Tears began flowing from both of her eyes. "To be touched by you again, Master, to be given this gift, this opportunity. I have no words."

"I don't need your words," he replied. "I need your actions. I need She-Ra dead."

"Then it will be done!" she hissed with renewed vigor.

Unlocking the cell, he stepped back once more as she fell at his feet. "See that you get yourself cleaned up before you see me," he said coldly. "Your stench disgusts me." Hordak turned and exited the hall that had been the only thing Shadow Weaver had seen in years. While the witch cried tears of joy at her newfound freedom, she simultaneously balled her hands into fists so tight that they caused her pain. Even from a distance, Hordak could feel the emotions that She-Ra riled up within the woman. They were so intense that they almost seemed tangible. With a wicked smile, he looked back at her, still seething on the cold stone floor. At last, his most faithful follower was ready to resume her place at his side.

13.

BRIGHT MOON

Randor and Duncan made their way through the deep snows of the Whispering Woods, each step forward chilling them even more than the one before. While they had left Tellus in the middle of summer only hours ago, Etheria was going through one of its harshest winters in years. In the brief time since he and Duncan had arrived with the aid of the Cosmic Key, Randor had already begun to wonder how much more of the cold he could take. Duncan at least had his mechanical armor covering much of his body. Randor, whose arms were bare and whose clothes were thin, wasn't as lucky. "Are you sure we're heading in the right direction?" he asked his oldest friend with an audible shudder.

"My sensors indicate that there is a settlement due south, and not far from here," Duncan replied. He paused briefly, rubbing his mustache absent-mindedly. "Of course, there's no way to know if my sensors are accurate in this dimension."

"Wonderful," Randor said sourly. "Still, I think I see something ahead, or are my old eyes playing tricks on me?"

Removing his ocularis from a compartment on the rear of his belt, Duncan held the unit to his right eye and scanned the distance ahead of them. The leafless

trees provided much less of an obstacle than they would have earlier in the Etherian year and it didn't take much searching before his eye caught sight of what Randor must have been referring to. "Ah, I see it. Looks like smoke, but there are several small pillars of it. That means that it's most likely smoke from cooking fires rather than one large one."

"Then we must be heading in the right direction," Randor offered.

"Anything that's in the opposite direction of that Fright Zone you mentioned sounds like the right direction to me," Duncan replied. "We need to avoid The Horde at all costs. Neither of us will be up to much of a fight if we don't warm up soon. If we can come into contact with some villagers, perhaps they can lead us toward the Rebellion."

"It shouldn't take long to get to the village," Randor began, "but the heating pack you gave me earlier seems to have worn itself out."

Duncan nodded and reached into his satchel, removing a soft, square-shaped container. Giving it a stiff smack with his hand, the container reacted to the impact and began to warm, giving off visible steam in the wintery forest. "It's the last one," he remarked as he handed it to the former king.

"Thank you kindly, my friend," Randor said as he took the pack and placed it under his shirt, tight against his chest. As a former soldier in his father's army, Randor knew that your extremities often felt the most effects of the cold, but keeping your chest warm was far more important. His feet were protected well enough by his boots and he could keep his arms folded against his chest. That would have to suffice for now. Besides, he hoped that he and Duncan would be back home before long, the Great Rebellion in tow. He prayed that they found them soon and that he wasn't being naive in his expectations regarding the friendliness of the locals.

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Nearly an hour later, Randor and Duncan exited the forest and made their way into the snow-swept village whose smoke had given it away earlier. Up close, the village had quaint and welcoming architecture, despite that, all of the doors and windows that they could see were of course closed due to the cold, and neither man saw anyone milling about outside. It was getting close to dusk and Etheria's three moons were rising, surprisingly close to one another. Etheria had to be due for new moons soon, as all three appeared to be but slivers of light. It looked like it was

going to be a dark night indeed. Duncan pointed wordlessly to a building to their left called "The Laughing Swan Inn," to which Randor nodded in response. It would be good to get warm again, he thought. Duncan pressed the door to the inn open and fresh aromas from the kitchen made Randor's mouth water.

"Welcome, strangers," a man said to them from behind the bar in the back. "Name's Garv. What can I do for you?"

"We're looking for some friends of ours," Duncan began, "but we've been having some trouble locating them."

"From out of town, I take it?" Garv asked.

"Yes, that's right," Duncan replied, "and I'm afraid we don't know our way around very well."

"I can see that. You look frozen to the bone. Have two drinks on the house. They're hot. Should warm you up some." Randor and Duncan approached the bar and sat down on two wooden stools across from the bartender, thanking him as they took their warm drinks. "Who are your friends?" Garv asked.

"Castaspella, for one," Randor said. "The other two I'm aware of go by the names of Bow and Glimmer."

"So, they're your friends, but you only know their names?" Garv pressed, a suspicious look in his eye.

"To be more specific, they are friends of my daughter Adora," Randor replied. "I'm seeking them out to aid her."

Garv smiled. "Then you should have led with that, sir. You must understand, there's lots of folks 'round these parts that don't want to be found."

"You know Adora?" Randor asked.

"All of the poor folk of Thaymor know Adora," Garv answered. "Hold her in high regard, too."

"That's good to hear," Duncan said. "Adora's friends," he began, "well, we had a good idea of where their camp was located, but they seem to have moved on."

Garv nodded. "I figured as much. This horrible winter has driven many within the Whispering Woods from their homes. Aside from the bitter cold itself,

The Horde has been more active than usual in that area. Finally getting a good look at it, what with the leaves gone."

"But do you know where they've moved to?" Randor asked.

"Sure, sure," Garv replied, "but I'd be risking a lot telling you. Hordak has spies everywhere."

"We can pay for the information, if that helps," Duncan proposed.

"Well, that always helps," Garv said with a grin, "but not being from around here, what kind of currency have you got? Most coins aren't worth much in Thaymor."

"Perhaps not coin at all, then?" Duncan said. "Are you in need of a weapon? I'm the Man-At-Arms for the king where we come from."

Garv's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward with a harsh whisper. "Keep your voice down. You know Hordak doesn't allow civilians to have weapons. Where did you say your kingdom was located?"

"Very far from here," Duncan replied.

"Off world?" Garv asked.

"You could say that," Duncan said with a wry smile.

"Very well then, what weapons have you got?" Garv said. "Regardless of Hordak's ban, I'd still like to be able to protect my inn, much less my own hide. Troopers are always causing a ruckus in the bar. I've almost bought it a few times already just trying to run my business, here. So long as no one knows I have it, it can't hurt anything."

"Actually, I have something that won't be easily recognizable as a weapon at all, if that helps." Duncan pulled off his right gauntlet and slid it toward the bartender. "When it's on, you make a fist, palm down, and bend your wrist like this," he illustrated what he meant with his own hand, "and it will fire a stun pulse strong enough to take down anything smaller than a Shadow Beast."

"Shadow Beast?" Garv asked.

"About four heads taller than a man and twice as wide," Duncan explained. "The best part is that you can wear it under the sleeves of your tunic, concealed from The Horde's prying eyes."

Garv took the gauntlet swiftly and hid it under the bar. "That will do. Stun pulse, you say?"

Duncan nodded. "It should give you plenty of time to escape and you won't have to worry about the repercussions of killing a Horde member."

"Stunning one will probably bring enough repercussions on its own, but thank you," Garv said.

"So where have my daughter's friends relocated to?" Randor asked.

The bartender looked toward Randor and leaned in close. "Word is that they've gone to ground in the kingdom of Bright Moon."

"And it's good word?" Randor pressed.

"The best," Garv said with a smile. "Heard it from Princess Glimmer, herself. It's her home."

"Where is this Bright Moon located?" Duncan asked.

"Just across the river that runs behind this village," the bartender answered.

"That close?" Randor said, surprised.

"Indeed. It's one of the only areas on Etheria that Hordak doesn't cast his shadow over," Garv said.

"Why don't you go there, then?" Randor asked. "Why stay here when you're so near safety?"

Garv raised his eyebrow slightly. "Because Thaymor is my home. I was born here. Leaving it would be giving into Hordak, I suppose. I'd rather stay and defy him in my own way, usually by keeping his Troopers too drunk to do much damage to the village or its people."

Randor nodded and smiled in understanding. If the rest of Etheria was anything like Garv, then Randor was happy to know that Adora had found a hardy and resilient group of people to call friends. Duncan thanked Garv as he stood, prompting Randor to do the same. As they headed to the door, the bartender called after them, "be careful out there!"

"We will, thank you," Randor replied.

The two of them made their way to the other side of the small village and found the river that Garv had spoken of. It raged past violently, looking far more

dangerous than they had expected. Duncan groaned. “Now we just have to figure out how to get across.”

14.

A UNIQUE JOURNEY

Dare awoke to find himself lying in a field, Castle Grayskull nowhere in sight. What had happened? Had that strange orb transported him outside somehow? It wouldn't surprise him if he'd been magically teleported or something similar. Standing up, the child took in his surroundings, which consisted of fields as far as his eyes could see, and nothing more. Unsure of which direction to head in, Dare nonetheless began to walk forward. He knew from his lessons that if he ever found himself lost, he was to stay put so that his parents could find him, but he knew that this was not a normal situation. This was a unique journey that he would need to embark on alone.

Dare had heard stories of his father's adventures, most of which as He-Man, but that had all happened before Dare had been born. In his lifetime, there'd been very little adventure to be had, though he'd always wanted to embark on one of his own. Perhaps this was it? He couldn't say why, but he felt as if he were heading in the right direction, back toward Grayskull, back toward his mother. Despite being unfamiliar with his surroundings, he had a feeling that he'd be back there in no time.

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An unknown amount of time later, Dare crested yet another grassy hill. He'd lost count of how many he'd already climbed. Surprisingly, he wasn't sore. He wasn't even tired. Whatever the orb had done to him, it seemed to have energized him. That or, as the child was beginning to suspect, things weren't as they seemed here. There was something somehow unreal about his surroundings. Though he'd been walking in the same direction for some time now, he felt as if he hadn't made any actual progress. He'd swear that the hills he'd just climbed were in fact the same exact hill each and every time. Something strange was going on, and he didn't understand it. Sitting down on the soft grasses, he gazed at his surroundings and fought back tears. "Some adventure," he said aloud to himself.

"Your adventure has only just begun," he heard a voice say. It came from above him. Looking up, he saw an object descending from the clouds, silhouetted by the bright sun as it flew to the ground in front of him. As it landed, he realized it was a falcon, recognizing it from his studies. A white falcon.

"Did you say something?" the boy asked.

"Do you see anyone else?" the bird mused.

"Well, no," Dare replied. Still, he couldn't help but look around just to make sure.

"You've talked to animals before," the bird said.

"Just Cringer," the child responded, looking back at the creature, "but nobody knows about that. Not even my mother." Getting on his hands and knees, he inched closer to the animal, which cocked its head at him as he approached. "Are you friendly?" he asked.

"I should hope so," the falcon answered. It flew into the air and swooped around, landing deftly on the boy's right shoulder. It startled him, but the feeling quickly passed as the bird leaned into his ear and whispered, "see?"

Dare smiled as he stood up again. "Alright, then. Can you tell me where I am?"

"You're in the Everdream," the falcon replied.

"You mean I'm," he paused, his voice falling to a whisper, "dead?"

The falcon cackled lightly. It was a strange sound to hear coming from a bird, but then so was a voice. "No, my dear boy. You're just in a very deep sleep. A magical sleep."

"So, I can't walk back to Castle Grayskull, can I? Because my body's already there?"

"You're very astute," the falcon observed, "very much like your mother at your age. But don't worry, I'll remain with you."

"You know my mother?" Dare asked.

"I wasn't there personally, but I watched her a great deal as she was growing up. Of course, I wasn't here then, either. In those days, I was still alive."

"So you're a ghost?"

"Not in the way you'd think," the bird replied. "This is the Everdream, where all Zoar believing Eternians go when they leave the mortal realm. This is my home. You, however, are just visiting."

"How did you die, then?" he asked.

"I made a sacrifice to save someone I loved."

"You're a hero, then," Dare replied. "My father said that's what heroes do; make sacrifices."

"That they do," the falcon said. "Your father understands that more than most, but one could also say that it was simply my time; that the world was ready for me to leave it. But dark days are upon us and I feel that I am needed once again." The bird jumped off the boy's shoulder and landed on the ground near his feet. "I feel it's time we were properly introduced."

"OK. What's your name?" Dare asked. With a flash of light, the falcon took on the form of a woman. Rising to a standing position before him, she was dressed in an elaborately feathered white gown and wore a falcon-like headdress. Despite her outlandish attire, the first thing Dare noticed was the kindness in her eyes.

"My name is Teela 'Na," the woman said. "I'm your grandmother."

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"I don't like this," Teela said as she looked down at her son's still form. He was lying in a down bed and would appear to anyone else as if he were in a peaceful sleep. Teela knelt next to him, holding his hand in her own. Regardless of how peaceful he appeared, she worried for him, knowing that his sleep was unnatural.

"I don't know what to say," Mekaneck said.

The queen of Eternia glanced toward her old friend. "It's not your fault," she said, though the words admittedly came with some difficulty. "Dare can be a handful, even without his sensitivity to magic. Coming to a place like this, he was bound to be curious. I've always been afraid of something like this happening. In fact, I'm surprised it's taken this long. He's been getting progressively stronger, so much so that he tries to hide it from me, but a mother always knows."

"There's nothing to fear," Veena said, speaking up from the rear of the room. "I sense that he's found his guide. He will be well-protected."

"What is there to protect him from?" Mekaneck asked. "If he's in the Everdream, he shouldn't be in any danger," he said. "Right?" he asked after a pause.

"The Everdream can be a dangerous place for the living," the Goddess replied honestly. "That is, if they stay there for too long. It isn't meant for them. Still, as I've said, he is protected. Teela's mother is with him."

"My mother?" Teela asked. "The Sorceress is with him?"

Veena smiled. "Indeed, and she will protect him fiercely, if need be."

"That does make me feel better," Teela admitted, running her hand through Dare's dark brown hair.

"And I am glad that it does, for you two have your own work to attend to," Veena said. "Dare will be doubly protected. I will be at the side of his mortal form and your mother will be with his spirit. You wanted him protected. Now he is. You needn't worry about Dare but for your world. Call your warriors, have them prepare for the coming battle."

"Will it be that soon?" Teela asked. "Adam and Adora have yet to come back from their mission."

Veena nodded. "They will return. However, Hordak and his army will be upon you soon. You must make your preparations, Queen Teela. Go. Dare is safe," she repeated.

Teela felt a tear run down her cheek as she leaned in and kissed her son on his forehead. She knew that Veena was right. They had work to do, and she'd have to have faith that Dare would be alright, as the Goddess promised. Wiping away the tear, she stood and clasped Mekaneck on the upper arm as she passed by him. "Come on, Orius," she said, gathering herself. "She's right. We have an invasion to prepare for."

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Dare continued to make his way through the grassy fields, his right hand in his grandmother's left. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"We eventually need to get you back to the waking world," she began, "but we have some way to go yet, and things to do before you leave here. There is much that must be revealed, if we're going to help."

"This all looks the same to me. How do you know we're going the right way?" he asked.

"You're only seeing the surface of the Everdream, much like your aunt Adora did when I reached out to her years ago," she began. "You've read about the Everdream, or at least have had things read to you about it. Those books and scrolls describe it as you see it here: endless fields on a bright and sunny day, accompanied by a soothingly cool breeze. However, all those accounts were from the living. Like them, you are viewing the Everdream from the perspective of a living mortal. You are, in essence, viewing it with your critical, waking mind. Pull back the veil. Open your eyes, Dare. Really open them, and you will see it as it truly is."

"How do I do that?" the boy asked.

They stopped walking and the Sorceress knelt in front of him, holding him gently by the shoulders, a warm smile on her face. "You are a very special boy, Dare. I know that you can feel the magic around you; within you. Don't hide from it, as you often do. Embrace it. Control it." He gave her a look that showed her that he didn't understand. "Close your eyes," she said. He did so. "Now, ignore

what you think is around you. Push the image of the fields from your mind. Feel the forces that surround you and penetrate your being. Sense them as they extend outward from you, touching the Everdream and everything within it. Can you feel it?"

After a moment of concentration, the boy frowned. "I think so."

"What do you feel?" she asked.

"It just feels normal. Like I'm outside, but not like a dream at all. Like it's real."

"Good. Then you're on the right path. The Everdream is, in many ways, only a sidestep from the world you know, but it isn't restrained by the same rules that govern the waking world. For example, think of Castle Grayskull, picture it in your mind, and you will be there." She released his shoulders gently. "Now open your eyes."

He did so, seeing her warm face once again. Behind her however, the infinite grassy fields were gone, replaced by the familiar landscape of Tellus. In the distance, he could see Castle Grayskull standing alone on the other side of the chasm that surrounded it. "We're back," he said with a grin.

The Sorceress shook her head. "In a manner of speaking. In visualizing Castle Grayskull, the Everdream has brought you to it, though out of phase with the world of the living. A sidestep away, as I'd mentioned."

"So, it's not real?" he asked. "It's a dream?"

"No, it is real," she replied. "We are the dream."

"I don't understand," he confessed.

She smiled once more. He was a child, after all. "Perhaps in time. You already understand more than most." No living mortal had ever seen beyond the grassy fields of the Everdream's surface. The fact that young Dare could see what he saw at all was the most stunning acceptance of magic that she'd ever encountered, let alone from someone so young. Perhaps it was better that he didn't realize his own power. "We need to get inside the castle," she said. "There is much I have to show you, that you need to learn to be properly prepared. Hordak's magic is powerful. It's possible that his attack on Tellus will encompass more than just the waking world. We need to protect it here in the Everdream just as much as your mother and her friends need to on their plane."

"But how can I help? I'm just a kid," he admitted.

"In the Everdream, you're whatever you want to be. You can even be a warrior; a hero."

"Like my father?"

"Yes, dear. Just like your father. You need simply imagine it and it will be. Are you ready?"

"Since He-Man's not here, I guess it's up to me." After a short pause, he said, "Though, I'd have to be taller."

"Of course," she replied with a grin.

Dare concentrated and found himself growing to match the Sorceress's height and then surpass it. "And I'd need to be strong; older." With the thought, his muscles swelled and he felt his body change even more, growing into a young man. His hair grew with him and he pulled it into a ponytail with a band he formed in the air, simply with the power of his mind. "Wow," he said. Soon, he found himself adorned with mechanical armor. A child no more, his dream self was a warrior, and a warrior needed a weapon. Extending his hand, he imagined one that his Grandpa Duncan had been working on, but had deemed impossible to make real. However, all things were possible in the Everdream. In seconds, the sword appeared and he could feel its golden hilt in his hand. Pressing a button on the handle, the laser sword sparked to life, forming a solid blade of energy. Pressing it again, he deactivated it and placed the hilt upon his back.

"Impressive," the Sorceress said.

"Now I'm a warrior," Dare replied, the deep tones of his new voice surprising him, "and soon I'll be a hero, just like my father. Let's get to the castle." With those words, Dare, now inhabiting the adult body he'd often fantasized about battling evil in, began walking once more, the Sorceress of Grayskull, who had once advised his father as He-Man, at his side. Together, Dare felt that nothing could stop them from protecting the world he loved.

15.

THE RED WITCH

Hordak leaned forward on his throne and clasped his hands beneath his chin as Shadow Weaver approached. She wore new robes, their red color bright and clean. Her head and face were once again hidden beneath a hood and face-covering, respectively. Her magic restored to her, Shadow Weaver glided across the floor in her unique way, her bare feet hovering slightly above it. The leader of The Horde had to suppress a smile. He was glad to have her in his presence again, even if he wouldn't admit it. "I have come before you as you have asked, Lord," she said in her whisper-like voice.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, you have. It is good to see you as yourself again."

"It is good to feel like myself again as well, Lord Hordak," she replied, both eyes glowing fiercely. "I thank you for renewing my powers and place in your hierarchy. I'm not sure what Draco will think of it, however."

"What Draco thinks doesn't concern me," Hordak said. "He's a faithful servant."

"You called upon me to gain my insights into Despara's mind," Shadow Weaver said. "Where should we begin?"

"It's simple," Hordak replied. "I want to know what she's up to. I've had reports that she's activated her Cosmic Key not once, but twice. The second time, she returned home to Etheria. I want to know where she's hidden herself."

Shadow Weaver nodded and spoke an incantation under her breath, opening a veil in the air before them. The spell was one that Hordak knew. He was also aware that she was intelligent enough to recognize that fact. The truth was that opening a veil was easy, but opening it in the right direction, to view the thing you were searching for, that was something else entirely. The spell worked best when one had a connection to the thing they were searching for. Shadow Weaver had always been sentimental toward Despara. That sentiment had been the woman's downfall, but he was now giving her the opportunity to make it her redemption. If anyone could find the girl, it was the red witch. Perhaps she hated She-Ra, yet Hordak knew that hate was often born from love and a feeling of betrayal. Somehow, despite everything that had happened, she cared for their adopted daughter, even now. Shadow Weaver therefore had more of an understanding of Despara's mind than he did. As such, her search should yield more accurate results than his own had. Just as he'd had the thought, she began to prove him right, as he saw the rebels within the veil, gathered at the kingdom of Bright Moon. It wasn't that surprising to find them there. With the coming of winter driving them from the forest, the spell of protection that surrounded Bright Moon made it the ideal hideaway. Truthfully, he hadn't spent much effort in finding the rebels since the snows fell. What he was preparing for, they had no hope of stopping anyway, despite their growing aptitude for war under the leadership of Despara.

In years past, many of his subjects had rebelled against The Horde. It was nothing new. This group, however, led by Despara, had proven to be more than just a mild nuisance. They were a grating irritation that he had so far failed to squash. For as many centuries as Hordak had lived, he had fought many battles. They had been finished quickly and decisively. The Horde's reputation preceded it, the mere legends of the victories themselves winning many more before a weapon need even be drawn. Conquering a planet was easy when fear crippled its inhabitants. This rebellion was different. Hordak usual tactic was to crush opposing forces swiftly and without warning. He was not accustomed to having a protracted war, drawn out over this many years. He loathed to admit it, but he was out of his element. Years before, he'd stripped Shadow Weaver of her power, locking her away for being complicit in Despara's departure, whether she had supported it or not. In doing so, Hordak had come to realize that he'd blinded

himself to Despara's actions. Without Shadow Weaver at his side, he failed to understand the girl's thinking and tactics. Finally, Shadow Weaver's attachment to the girl would be of aid to him, rather than a hindrance. It was only when he saw a look of confusion in Shadow Weaver's eyes that he realized something was wrong. The witch said something softly that he didn't hear. "What?" Hordak asked. "Speak up."

"I said she's not here," Shadow Weaver replied. "Despara is not on Etheria at all."

"Then who is?" he asked, sitting forward. "The Key sent someone here. We know this."

"Indeed, but it's not her," his servant replied. "In fact, I can't sense her at all." Closing the veil and opening a new one, this time showing Alpha Prime, the planet called Tellus, she cursed. "Nor is she on her birth world. She is gone, Master, as is her brother. Both are beyond my sight."

"Then what good are you?" he asked angrily, his fist striking the arm of his throne. Perhaps he'd overstated her usefulness.

"I will find her, Lord," Shadow Weaver answered. "I promise you that, but you miss what I am truly telling you."

He sensed that she was trying to turn the situation around to her favor, but he wasn't sure how that was possible. She'd failed him yet again. "And that is?"

"Both she and her brother have disappeared," she said. "Alpha Prime's two most powerful warriors have left it ripe for invasion. Why wait until the proper time for your spell?" she asked. "Why not conquer Alpha Prime now and be ready and waiting when the appropriate time comes?"

Hordak sat in silence for a long moment. She may have a point. However, he had something else to attend to before he took that step. Perhaps it was merely a point of pride, but such was his way. Despara may not be here for him to punish, but he had other ways of hurting her. "Soon," he said. "But first let's see who she sent here in her place. It seems we'll find the answer in Bright Moon," he began, "along with the Rebellion. We will indeed be leaving for Alpha Prime very soon, Shadow Weaver. However, it'd hardly be like me to leave loose ends behind here." He smiled, the grin contorting his face, somehow making it even more ugly. "Whether Despara is with them or not, I feel that it's time for this little rebellion to finally come to an end."

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Duncan and Randor both breathed heavily on the other side of the river. They had managed to make their way across, but the freezing waters had been dangerously cold and a constant threat. Duncan knew that he was faring better than his friend, his mechanical armor helping to insulate him from the weather's effects. Unlike him, Randor was cold and shivering. His hair and beard, wet from the winds that had howled at them as they crossed the river, were even beginning to ice up. Knowing that they would have to pack lightly, Duncan hadn't brought a heavy weapon, but he now regretted being without one. He'd already used most of the gauntlet's limited power to fell a tree across the river for them to use as a bridge as there weren't any real bridges that they could see. Duncan realized that this was probably a conscious effort by the rebels to keep The Horde away from the kingdom, at least preventing a silent approach by land. If Hordak wanted to attack Bright Moon, he'd have to fly in and give away his presence early. Knowing this, Duncan had made sure to dislodge the tree after they'd reached the other side, so that they couldn't be followed. If only they'd known how to use the Cosmic Key more properly, they could have simply opened a portal to Bright Moon, but that wasn't the case.

That being said, this wasn't the first time Duncan had found himself in this type of situation. During the Siege of Crim, when he was much younger, he'd been forced to go for thirty days in a desert without rations, living off the land. He knew that this wouldn't be as bad as that, winter and snow be damned. In fact, he could see the kingdom of Bright Moon from here. They were almost there. He just had to ensure that Randor didn't die of hypothermia first. Thinking quickly, the Eternian Man-At-Arms gathered some kindling and logs. Once he'd placed them into a decent pile for a fire, he used his remaining gauntlet's laser to ignite them.

He loathed stopping, but his friend wasn't looking well and it was important to keep him warm. The former king had knelt down and leaned in close to the fire in an attempt to absorb its heat, but Duncan knew that that wasn't enough. It was imperative that he keep the man moving, but he'd allow him the comfort of the fire, at least for a little while. Despite Randor's spending the past several years as ambassador, staying in the plushest of surroundings as the guest of many other kingdoms, Duncan knew that his friend was, at heart, just as much of a warrior as he was. The only difference was that Randor had thought that those days were long over and that Duncan's still clinging to them was foolish. Regardless of what Randor or anyone else thought, Duncan himself was proud of the shape that he was in, of the fact that he'd continued his training, steadfastly ignoring the aches

and pains that came with age; instead working through them and using them for motivation. He could have retired from his post years ago, allowing his apprentice Clamp Champ to finally take over as Man-At-Arms, but the old warrior had chosen not to. Now, with the threat of The Horde looming over them all, Duncan felt vindicated in his diligence. Even if this was the last war he'd ever fight, and he hoped that it would be, he knew his contributions would be worthy. He didn't have time to think about that now, though. If he didn't keep Randor healthy, they might never make it back. He was the only one these rebels knew. Bringing himself back to the situation at hand, he addressed his friend, "How are you feeling?"

Randor looked up at him with tired eyes. "The heat is helping, my friend. Thank you. I'm getting much too old for these adventures."

"That's what they say about me, but I work hard to prove them wrong," Duncan replied.

"I haven't been," Randor said with a raspy laugh. "I've gotten soft, Duncan, in more ways than one."

Duncan managed a thin smile. "Soon enough we'll be back home and this will all be over."

"Yes, and then we'll merely have Hordak and The Horde to worry about," Randor said with a soft laugh. "How can I help to protect our people when a little snow and a frigid river are almost enough to stop me?"

"First of all," Duncan began, "it was a lot of snow and a freezing river. The mist that wind kicked up was no picnic, but we made it. Second of all, don't forget that our mission here is to return with Adora's friends in the Rebellion. You could go through whatever is coming without so much as lifting a sword, and you will have already done a great deal to protect not just the people of Eternia, but of the entire world, if not the universe itself."

"You should have been a wordsmith, Duncan. You always know the right thing to say." Randor paused, making sure that his own next words carried the proper weight. "You are a wise friend and I value your council now just as much as I did when I was king."

Duncan laughed. "You rarely listened to me in the early days," he said as he joined Randor near the fire, kneeling next to his oldest friend.

"True," Randor said, "but I did learn my lesson."

"Eventually," Duncan replied. "We'll warm up here for a while and make our way to Bright Moon at first light. In the meantime, you need to keep moving and get your blood flowing." Randor nodded as he rubbed his hands together.

* * *

The following morning, Duncan and Randor made their way to the Kingdom of Bright Moon. Duncan was happy to see that his friend seemed reenergized in the morning sun. He'd appeared the previous night as the old man that Duncan knew, but often forgot, that he was. He also knew that if he looked closely enough at himself, he'd see the same age and limitations. Time had a way of catching up with you, whether you liked it or not. They emerged into a clearing at the edge of the woods and saw the light of the sun's rays glinting off a golden castle. "That's our destination, all right," Duncan said.

"Let's hope that they're welcoming," Randor replied.

They approached the structure and immediately noticed that there didn't appear to be any doors or windows. "How do we get in?" Duncan asked.

"I'm not sure," Randor responded, as perplexed by the castle as he was.

"Halt!" they heard a voice shout from above them. Looking up, they saw a line of archers upon a high balcony, bows drawn tight. "Who goes there?!" one of the archers called.

"Duncan and Randor of the planet Tellus," Randor replied to the man. "I am the father of Adora of the Great Rebellion. Hopefully, you've heard of her and we can avoid getting shot at."

The archer laughed as he lowered his weapon, the others following his lead. "I do know of her," the man replied. "In fact, she's one of my closest friends. She told me your name. Tell me that, and I'll believe you."

"Randor," he replied.

The archer smiled. "Greetings, Randor. I've heard a lot about you. Why don't you come on in?"

"There doesn't seem to be an entrance," Randor said.

"That's the trick of it, Sir," the man replied. "There doesn't seem to be. Head toward the center there, then make a sharp right."

"And?" Duncan asked inquisitively.

"Just keep walking," the archer said with a wink and smile.

Each man did as the archer said and found themselves approaching the smooth outside wall of the castle. Suspecting that magic was at play here, they heeded his words and continued walking right through the illusion of a wall. On the other side, they found themselves within a well-lit vestibule. Before them was an iron door; locked. Several minutes passed before they heard the clanking sound of the door being unlocked from the other side. The heavy door swung inward and a handsome man adorned in golden armor and bearing a cavalier mustache greeted them with a wide grin. Duncan and Randor recognized him as the archer who'd spoken to them.

"Name's Bow." He shook both of their hands in succession beginning with Duncan and then Randor, whom he locked eyes with. "It's an honor to meet you, Sir." Turning back to Duncan, he continued, "and you as well, Man-At-Arms. Adora has had many good things to say about you both. Won't you come in?" The two of them walked past Bow into an elaborately decorated chamber. Once they were all inside, the archer closed the door, relocking it behind them. "I'm sorry for the invisible entrance. You understand."

"Of course," Duncan replied. "It's quite an ingenious idea; something to think about doing at the palace when we return."

"Always looking for new forms of security," Randor remarked.

"It's part of my job," Duncan quipped. After a pause, he added, "Well, it's actually Mekaneck's job, but I still try to help out."

Randor smiled warmly, turning toward Bow. "During my time as King, his daughter was my Captain of the Guard."

"I know," Bow laughed. "I've also heard a lot about Queen Teela and Adora's brother, King Adam. Adora may have only been home with you for a year, but the way she talks about you, it's easy to see how much she loves and cares about her family." Leading them further into the castle, Bow continued, "I hate to sound so forward, but what brings you here? Adora left some time ago after being called home by the one you call the Sorceress and she has yet to return. I'd be lying if I said we weren't growing a little concerned. Things have come to a bit of a head here lately with The Horde."

"Adora and her brother were sent away on a secret mission," Randor replied. "I'm afraid that even we don't know the specifics. The reason we're here is because we need your help."

"In what way?" Bow asked. "We'd be happy to assist you, I'm sure, but we have our hands full here on Etheria, especially without Adora."

"Very soon, The Horde may be leaving Etheria altogether," Duncan replied.

"Best news I've heard all day," Bow said, a bit dryly. Randor suspected that he found Duncan's claims unbelievable. He didn't blame him. From what Adora had told him, The Horde had been on this planet since Bow was a small boy. The idea of them packing up and leaving would indeed be difficult to believe.

"The Horde Emissary has already visited our world," Randor began. "I'm not sure if Adora has told you, but Hordak has been spent centuries searching for a world he calls 'Alpha Prime.' That world is the one we call home." He paused, hoping that the gravity of his words was sinking in. "Hordak means to invade it with the full force of The Horde. Etheria will be meaningless to him as soon as he leaves it, but if he achieves his goal, he will unmake reality as we know it, in effect killing us all. Your rebellion knows him. Because of Adora, you know his tactics. In her absence, we've come here to plead for your help; to ask you to help us fight him on our world, in order to save countless others."

"I already know that I'm in," Bow replied with no hesitation. "I'd do anything for Adora, and if what you say about Hordak's plan is true, then I'm sure the others will be most eager to help as well."

"We can't thank you enough," Duncan said.

"Don't thank me yet," Bow replied. "We still need to speak with Glimmer and her mother, Queen Angella. They're the real bosses around here. I'll have a word with them while you two get warmed up. The guards will see you to some rooms. I'll come and get you later, after I speak to the queen."

16.

ONE TIME OFFER

Skeletor stood alone on a balcony overlooking the Sands of Time. Directly ahead of him was the Central Tower. Though it was mostly hidden from view, he could see the crest of it, high above the sands below. To both his left and his right, in the distance, he could also see its sisters; Viper Tower and Zoar Tower. The noonday sun and clear skies made them more easily visible than the mysterious Central Tower. He wondered what the common man thought of them. Did their sudden reappearance after an eon make the people uneasy? What would they think if they knew that he himself shared that feeling? More than that, the towers weren't all that he was concerned about. Trap Jaw had returned the previous day and ultimately had allied himself with Skeletor once more, but the skull-faced sorcerer didn't trust his old friend. Skeletor had experienced numerous betrayals in his lifetime, and yet he still distrusted Trap Jaw more than almost anyone from his past. At this point, the Zalesian king knew better than to put his faith in anyone other than Evelyn. She had betrayed him herself in the past, but those days were long over. She'd had her reasons at the time, and he understood that now. However, the man who had once been his old friend Kronis still had every reason to hate him. Skeletor had been responsible for Kronis's disfigurement and transformation into Trap Jaw and it was something that the cyborg had never

forgotten. The king of Zalesia was in fact sure that Trap Jaw despised him, even if his old friend didn't let it show.

As such, he'd chosen to leave Trap Jaw in Evelyn's care. She'd keep an eye on him during his time here and could handle him if necessary. If Trap Jaw stepped out of line, Skeletor knew that she wouldn't hesitate to put him down. In the meantime, Skeletor needed to solidify his battle plans. Turning away from the balcony, he stopped, suddenly aware that he was not as alone as he'd thought. "Who's there?" he called, placing his right hand on the hilt of his sword.

Emerging from the room's shadows as if he were one of them himself, Lord Draco stepped out into the light, stun pistol in hand. "I see you've gone back to your former look," the Horde member said. "I like it." Not about to let Draco make a fool of him for a second time, Skeletor drew his own pistol in an instant. Regardless of his efforts, Draco fired before Skeletor could attack, the blast striking the skull-faced sorcerer in the chest. The Zalesian king sank to the floor in a heap, unable to move, but otherwise fully aware of what was happening. Despite Skeletor's immense power and new armor, Draco's weapon had somehow dropped him like an experienced hunter would their prey. The Horde emissary holstered his pistol and walked past the prone king, leaning out over the balcony in the same spot that Skeletor had just been standing. "It's a lovely view," he proclaimed casually, his tone soft, as if they were old acquaintances. He pointed out toward the horizon. "The ability to see the Three Towers, all in a line in the distance. Remarkable." He indicated the outermost towers. "You may have noticed that those two have moved. Only slightly, mind you, but they have nonetheless. Before long they'll converge for the first time in history and the time for my master's spell will be at hand." Skeletor tried to reach for his weapon once again, but he was still frozen in place. All he could manage was a low groan as he struggled. Draco turned, looking back down at the king's still form.

"The harder you strain, the longer the effects last," he said nonchalantly. After a moment, he sighed. "Surely you know all of this already. Don't you wonder why I'm here?" He turned back toward the horizon and continued. "We have a connection, Keldor. You must have sensed it. I'm sure you've been curious as to how I know the things that I know; the secrets that you've long kept hidden. Perhaps that knowledge has angered you." Magical red flames danced about within Skeletor's empty eye sockets. Draco stole a glance and saw them. "I see that it has." Turning away from the balcony view for the last time, he squatted down and gazed intently at the king of the Gar. "Your mother was sent to the past by a powerful wizard, just as you'd heard. Marzo, if you'd been wondering. He didn't like competition, but I'm sure you know all about that. You and Randor both fought against him, if I'm not mistaken. What you don't know is that once Shokoti had

reached the past, before she was imprisoned, she'd had the opportunity to make another Dark One like her. In that moment, she made me what I am.

"I was visiting from my home world, along with my father," he continued. "She killed him, of course, along with so many others, but she spared me. I stayed at her side for some time, learning the ways of the darkest magics. I think in her own way, she missed you. It's a shame that you ran away. You could have had all of this power instead of me." Draco paused for a moment in thought. "Actually, I suppose that I should thank you. It was your absence that created me in a way, and I quite enjoy being what I am. As for Shokoti, eventually she was locked away in her temple; a long-forgotten memory for most, but not for you and me. Do you understand? We are brothers of a sort, Keldor. That is why I tell you these things. I've waited centuries to meet you. I always knew that I would one day. I could feel it."

"My name," the Zalesian king said with a pronounced struggle, "is Skeletor."

Draco stood quietly. "So it is," he conceded. "Though soon enough, if you stay the course you're on, it won't matter. You'll be dead, along with all of your people and everyone you have taught yourself to care for. I'm giving you an out; one that won't be offered to any other member of your little Council. Come back to The Horde, Skeletor. Join us once more, instead of dying on Alpha Prime like a fool."

"I don't think," Skeletor wheezed, "Hordak would agree with your making that offer."

Draco grinned. "Soon enough, all leaders fall." Pressing a sequence on his wrist-mounted Cosmic Key, he opened a portal to wherever he'd come from. "Think about it, brother."

"I'm not your brother," Skeletor replied, a little easier this time.

The Emissary sighed. "Perhaps not," he paused, "but I'm the only chance you have at surviving the destruction that awaits this world." With those words, the man stepped into the portal to gods know where. It closed shortly after. Only moments after the man in black had left, Skeletor began to regain control of his extremities, balling his hands into fists and gritting his teeth so tight that they hurt.

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Dare and the Sorceress Teela 'Na approached the closed jawbridge of Castle Grayskull, stopping at the edge of the chasm that surrounded it. "The gate is closed," Dare said, the sound of his voice in his new form still surprising to him. It sounded a lot like his father's.

"It is, but only for a moment," the Sorceress said. As she spoke, the bridge lowered, sinking to the grassy fields where they stood. At the entrance, Dare's mother Teela and her friend Orius stepped onto the bridge and began to cross.

"They're leaving," Dare said.

"They have a lot of work to do," she replied. "Just as we must prepare for Hordak here in the Everdream, so must they prepare in the waking world."

Turning toward his approaching mother, Dare reached for her. "Mother? Mother, it's me, Dare. I know I look different, but it's me." Teela continued to walk toward them, oblivious to their presence. "Mother?" he asked again. Before Dare could react, Teela and Mekaneck walked through both him and his grandmother as if they were not there at all, continuing on their way to the Wind Raider they'd all arrived in earlier. Moments later, the two adults sped off. "They couldn't see us," Dare said. "They walked through us like we aren't even here."

"We aren't," the Sorceress said. "Not in any way that they would know or recognize. Don't worry, Dare. If all goes according to plan, you'll be reunited with your family soon enough. For now, we have our own preparations to make." Motioning for him to follow, she led him into the castle, the wooden gate closing behind them with a loud thud.

Just inside the doorway, they were greeted by Veena, who smiled upon seeing the two of them. "I'm pleased to see you again, Dare," Veena said.

Dare turned to his grandmother. "She can see us?"

"Of course," the Sorceress replied.

"But how does she recognize me?" Dare asked, indicating his new form.

"She is Zoar," the Sorceress replied simply. "She sees everything."

"Do not fear," Veena continued. "While your grandmother guides your astral form, I will protect your mortal one. When you are no longer needed in the Everdream, you will return to your body and be a child once more."

"What is it I'm needed for?" he asked.

"She will show you," Veena said, indicating Teela 'Na. "Trust in her, and she will take care of you."

"Of course I will," the Sorceress said warmly as she turned back to him. "The Everdream can be dangerous for the living, but I won't let anything happen to you, my dear. The most important thing to me is to return you to your mother safely. First however, we need to prepare. It's time to learn of our great enemy Hordak and what gives him his power. More importantly, you will need to learn how to take that power from him. That, Dare, is your role in this war."

17.

ECLIPSE

Once they'd gotten cleaned up from their journey and had been given some time to rest, Bow led Randor and Duncan to Queen Angella's throne room where they found the winged ruler waiting for them along with her daughter Glimmer and the magic-wielding Castaspella, whom Randor had met during his escape from the Fright Zone years prior. Standing next to the queen was a rather hairy little fellow who could only be Gwildor. Randor remembered Adora speaking of him. He was the Thenurian locksmith that had created the Cosmic Key. Deferring to the queen, whose home they found themselves in, the newcomers remained silent. Much like Bow, however, both men found that the queen too was quick to smile, despite the rebellion's war-torn planet and the horrors of The Horde that they had no doubt seen time and time again. "Welcome to Bright Moon," the queen said in a welcoming tone. "Bow tells me that you are on a mission of grave importance."

"Indeed," Randor replied. "We were hoping to gain your help in our fight against Hordak."

"I know," she said simply. "Bow has explained the situation to me in some detail. Do you really think that Hordak is capable of doing what you claim? That he can unmake reality as we know it?"

"Sadly, I believe that you are more than familiar with Hordak's capabilities, My Lady," Randor said. "If we didn't think the threat was real, we wouldn't be here now."

"I understand," she replied before briefly pausing, "unfortunately, we cannot leave Etheria at this time."

"May I ask why?" Randor said.

"Of course," Queen Angella replied with a nod. "The kingdom of Bright Moon is protected from Hordak and his army by my magic. That magic however, is fueled by Etheria's moons and their power. If the moons go dark, my spell of protection is weakened, and the likelihood of an attack on Bright Moon increases exponentially. Your arrival at this particular time is unfortunate for you, but fortuitous for us, as tomorrow night we are due for a total lunar eclipse; a rare occurrence on this planet. My people here need protecting and will be happy to have your aid."

"The eclipse is always a bad omen," Gwildor chimed in, "now, without She-Ra, it is more of a threat than ever."

"Please forgive me if my words seem harsh," Duncan interjected, "but it is more than just your people that need protecting, Queen Angella. Soon your world, along with every other, may cease to exist altogether. If an attack does come during this eclipse, all staying here to fight does threaten to take away valuable warriors that we need for the coming battles on Tellus. We need all of you to help us save not just this world, but all worlds."

"I understand your feelings on the matter, Man-At-Arms, but I will not abandon my people in their time of need," Queen Angella replied. "We will remain here until after the eclipse, and we will fight if an attack comes. When the eclipse is over, I will consider your request, and only then. For now, I recommend that you both eat and get some rest. We will speak again once this threat has passed."

Duncan looked to Randor, but the former king merely shrugged. He understood Queen Angella's reluctance to leave her people when the threat of Hordak loomed, but he couldn't help but feel that she was failing to see the larger picture. The threat of Hordak loomed over everyone, not just the kingdom of Bright Moon.

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Randor and Duncan had both slept surprisingly well. Trudging through the snow for hours on end the day before had proven to be more than enough to ensure a decent night's sleep now that they were in a relatively safe place. In the hours after waking, Bow, Glimmer and Castaspella had shown them around the castle and introduced them to some of their friends and allies in the Great Rebellion. People like Flutterina and the former pirate Sea Hawk, who seemed most interested in where Adora was and what she was doing. Randor had a feeling that there was more to the story between this man and his daughter, but he didn't press. Such a thing would be for her to tell him.

By dinner, the castle was on high alert. Queen Angella and her court were providing a fine meal for her people, safer here than outside the castle walls with the imminent eclipse. The majority of the castle guards were placed around the perimeter, awaiting The Horde should they come. Randor found the room to be unnaturally quiet. Many barely touched their food. It was hard to find an appetite when you were in fear of an attack. Regardless, Randor smiled as he saw Duncan eating his own dinner quite voraciously, reminding Randor of one of his friend's favorite lines: "Never think while you're hungry." It sounded like a joke on the surface, but the truth was that the Eternian Man-At-Arms was right. The body needs nourishment, especially when facing a battle the likes of which Duncan's daughter Teela was preparing for back home, that they were all preparing for in their own way. Taking his friend's lead, Randor cut into his food and brought the first bite to his mouth.

Just as he took it, a long shadow fell over the room. The windows grew dark as the sun fell behind Etheria's moons. Seconds later, sirens erupted throughout the castle. Randor locked eyes with the Queen sitting on her throne. Within them, he recognized the fear that she hid from her people so well. He saw it because he'd surely felt it more than once during his own reign. It was visible for but the most fleeting of moments, but he knew that feeling well. Perhaps the queen believed more of what he and Duncan had told her about Hordak's plan than she had let on, but she was determined to stay and fight regardless. In a way, he respected her for that, even if he felt in his heart that it was the wrong decision. Still, if he himself had been placed in the same situation, he couldn't say for sure that he wouldn't have made the same choice. Rising to a standing position, Queen Angella looked away from him and toward her people, who gazed at her intently as

the windows darkened, waiting for her guidance. "The eclipse is upon us, my friends," she began. "More than likely, The Horde will follow. In this time of fear, when the spell of protection weakens, remember that only united together in hope will we defeat Hordak. We cannot give in to despair. We cannot—" an explosion stopped her short as it rocked the castle. The queen looked around wide-eyed as another soon followed, blowing the wall behind her to bits, quickly burying her in rubble amidst the screams of her people.

Randor heard Glimmer shout, but he didn't catch the princess's words for they were drowned out by the chaos that ensued. The Etherians had expected an attack, but not one this sudden. Such were the dangers of the Cosmic Key. The Horde must have used it to enter the castle directly. He cursed himself for allowing himself to relax, even momentarily, for this was now a preview of the fate that awaited his home planet.

Dozens of Horde Troopers marched through the newly-blasted hole in the castle wall, opening fire on the citizens of Bright Moon with little regard as to whether they were rebels or merely simple farmers. To the Horde Troopers, they were all the enemy. The castle's hidden entrance now seemed quaint in Randor's memory, for The Horde had made their own with the key, and they'd brought blood and death in with them. The rebels fell back on their instincts and took cover along with Randor and Duncan. Much of the citizenry, however, remained frozen in place and many caught the Horde Troopers' incoming fire. Seeing a young girl with brown hair standing alone amidst the carnage, Randor rushed back into the blaster fire and grabbed her, pulling her to safety with himself and Duncan who, along with the rebels, had begun returning fire. Pulling her close to him, he whispered reassurances into her ear as she began to cry.

A man who appeared to be an Etherian farmer ran toward him. "Telzy!" the man shouted.

"Papa!" she yelled in response. Randor let the girl go and she ran toward her father and embraced him. The farmer looked over his girl's shoulder and locked eyes with Randor. Nodding his thanks, the man took his daughter and fled to safety.

Turning back to Duncan and the rebels, Randor nodded to show his readiness, pulling out the pistol that Duncan had given him earlier. Readyng its charge, the former king quickly joined the group in returning fire. Despite their best efforts, the Horde Troopers continued to advance on them, piling into the castle through the hole they had so violently blasted through the wall. As each trooper entered, they quickly found cover of their own, each one advancing further than the

last. Randor felt a tugging at his sleeve and turned to find Gwildor looking at him earnestly.

"You were correct about Hordak," the Thenurian said. "Bright Moon has always been in danger during the eclipse, but this time even more so with his Cosmic Key. He's taking no prisoners!"

"He doesn't need any," Randor replied. "I told you, he's leaving this world. It would appear that he plans to leave it in ruins before he goes!"

"Of course," Gwildor responded with a look of horror. "He couldn't let the actions of Queen Angella stand, and now she's gone. If we don't get out of here, we'll all be next. We need to get to your planet as soon as possible!"

Through the smoky haze that lingered over the gaping hole in the wall, Hordak himself strode into the castle. Clad in his black armor, his red cape billowed out behind him. Placing his hands on his hips, the Horde leader surveyed the destruction caused by his troopers and smiled grimly when he saw the queen's arm jutting out from the rubble that had crushed her. He'd wanted to be rid of Angella for some time now. Now for the rest. Pointing into the castle, he commanded his troops, "Go. Find the ones who used She-Ra's Cosmic Key. I want them hunted down and brought to me."

"In fact, I think we should be leaving immediately," Gwildor insisted, deftly unlatching the Cosmic Key Randor had brought from the man's belt and running off toward the adjacent halls of the castle. "Come on!" he yelled behind him as he ran as fast as his little legs could carry him. "Hurry!"

Randor grabbed Duncan and they fled after Gwildor, a group of rebels, including their new friends, running closely behind them. "Gwildor, we can't leave!" Glimmer shouted as they ran through the hallway. All around them were citizens scrambling for safety. "I have a responsibility to these people!"

"You heard what Hordak's plan was!" Gwildor shouted back to her, frantically pressing buttons on the Cosmic Key as they made their way through the people who had managed to escape the original onslaught. "The only way to save these people is to go to Tellus and stop Hordak there. We've already lost Bright Moon. We'll take whoever we can manage as long as the portal remains open."

"But my mother's body—" she trailed off.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but she's gone," Gwildor said, stopping briefly to look the girl in her tear-filled eyes. "Glimmer, the best way to honor her is to live, and to stop The Horde once and for all." The princess nodded silently and Gwildor pressed the

large activation key, causing his invention to open, the twin-forked prongs spinning as they gave off colorful lights; the prelude to the key opening a portal to take them all far, far away from here. The diminutive inventor turned and the portal opened with a brilliant flash of light just ahead of them. The people within the hallway gasped in shock as they saw the little man jump headfirst into the portal and disappear.

"People of Bright Moon!" Randor shouted. "Jump into the portal. It will take you to our world and away from this chaos! Come with us and I promise that we will do everything in our ability to keep you safe!"

When they merely stared silently, Duncan shouted his own words of encouragement. "Get in there if you want to live!" he bellowed. "If you stay here, you'll all die!" Snapped out of their stupor, many of the citizens nodded and began making their way to the portal, jumping in after Gwildor. "We'd better get in there too, Randor. The portal will only remain open for so long."

"I know," Randor replied, and he ushered in Glimmer, Bow, Castaspella, Sea Hawk and several others before jumping in himself. He only hoped that all of the people behind him would make it before the portal closed.

The usual sense of falling overtook him and before long, Randor hit the ground and rolled in the thankfully soft grass before getting his bearings. They were just on the outskirts of Eternia's capital city. He could see the spires of Eternos Palace visible above the city's outer walls. He was happy to be home. Getting his footing back, Randor stood and rushed to Duncan in order to check on him. His old friend was alright of course, being in much better shape than Randor himself and protected by his armor on top of that. Along with the rebels and the two of them, there appeared to be about thirty civilians that had also made it through, each one astonished at the journey they had just taken. He could see Bow and Castaspella consoling Glimmer to his left, the farmer and his daughter whom Randor had saved to his right. He was glad to see that they had made it. He wished that they had been able to save more, but he knew that they'd had no choice. The Horde had overtaken the castle quickly once the attack had begun, the sound of blaster fire echoing throughout the halls before they'd escaped. Soon enough, Hordak would bring that same army here, only it would be much larger. He knew that what had happened in Bright Moon had only been a preview of the war that was to come and it was a sobering thought.

Ahead of him, the former king saw Gwildor looking at the lands surrounding them, a tear in his eye. Randor approached the locksmith and placed his hand on

his right shoulder. "We did all we could, Gwildor. I wish we could have saved more, but the deck was stacked against us from the start."

Gwildor looked up at him with a rather surprised expression, his small hands shaking. "Oh, it's not that, Randor. It's not that at all. I'm honestly surprised we got as many people here as we did. It takes a lot of courage to jump blindly into the unknown. No, it's just that before my imprisonment by The Horde, I'd once called Eternia home. I never thought I'd see it again, is all. It's just as beautiful as I remember. I've been all over the galaxy, my friend, to many worlds, but Tellus has always been a special place, and Eternia specifically. In fact, the Cosmic Key was originally constructed here when I was still a young man. It made sense considering that this planet holds the seed from which the rest of the universe once sprang."

"You knew that?" Randor asked. "You knew that Tellus was Alpha Prime all along?"

"Of course I knew it," Gwildor chided. "You don't build a key to anywhere in the universe without knowing and understanding where its center is."

"But how did Hordak never pry that particular bit of information from you?" Randor asked.

"Well, the most important part is that he never knew I had it," Gwildor said with a smirk. "Beyond that, Thenurians are well-known for their will power, you know." Randor chuckled. He was glad to have helped the inventor return home. Now he just had to help ensure that they all still had a home when this was over. "So where do we go from here?" Gwildor asked.

"To Eternos Palace," he answered. "My daughter-in-law, the queen, should already be aware of our arrival. We'll keep the people safe within the walls of the city and figure out what to do from that point. There must be some way we can prepare and protect ourselves."

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A dimension away, Hordak stood with Shadow Weaver in the destroyed throne room of Castle Bright Moon. The dead surrounded him, but they were mostly castle guards and regular citizens. The pitiful creatures at his feet couldn't possibly be the Great Rebellion that had caused him so much trouble over these past years.

"Where have they gone?" he asked the trooper kneeling before him. "Where are the rebels?"

"We know that the other key was used, My Lord. Before their executions, several of the citizens confessed that they saw a bright light take a number of people away," the trooper answered. "It's likely that the rebels were among them."

"This was always a possibility, My Lord; their escaping with the key," Shadow Weaver hissed.

Seething, Hordak formed a magical sword out of the air and violently executed the trooper before him. Turning to Shadow Weaver, his eyes blazed with anger. "I know that, you fool. Still, I wanted them dead. I wanted to send a message to She-Ra that she wouldn't forget."

"You have, Lord Hordak," Shadow Weaver said soothingly. "Bright Moon is destroyed, and with the rest of the army laying waste to the remaining free holds in Etheria as we speak, she won't have a home to return to. It will be but ashes and cinders."

"A hollow victory," he replied. "Soon to be rectified, however. Begin preparations. Leave behind anything that is not essential, and that goes for the rest of the army as well. We will make our way to Alpha Prime sooner than I had originally planned. The destruction here will seem like only a light rain compared to the storm that is coming to that world."

18.

PIERCING THE VEIL

Evelyn entered the Temple of Zalesia's royal bedchambers to find her husband standing on the balcony, silently looking out over the Sands of Time. Approaching him, she could sense that there was a reason for his silence. Something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked.

"From here, you can see all three towers," Skeletor answered, seemingly ignoring her question. "Do you notice anything about them? Anything different?"

Gazing out at the horizon, she took in the sight of each tower in turn, but saw nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. "Not that I can tell. Why?"

"They're moving," he answered. "The Central Tower remains fixed, there," he pointed, "but the other two are actually moving, growing closer to it."

"I actually came here to tell you the same thing," she replied. "I'd just been informed by the Gar scientists. But what does it mean?" she asked.

"It means that they are converging," he answered. "Soon enough, they will join the Central Tower and become... well, I don't know what exactly."

"But what does this mean for our plans?" she asked, growing worried. "Each group was to defend a single tower."

"More than likely, we will proceed just the same," he replied. "Each tower will still have to be defended from Hordak, but the convergence itself concerns me more than anything. Like grains of sand in an hourglass, the convergence of the towers shows us just how much time we have until The Horde invades and Hordak begins his spell to unmake reality. If I know him at all, I know that he's already begun, well in advance, but this," he pointed toward the Central Tower, "this will be where he focuses his attention, here in Zalesia where we've made our home. I believe that when the towers join, out there in the aptly named Sands of Time, that that is where the nexus will form."

"There's something else bothering you, though," she said. "I can sense it. What is it, My Love?" He remained silent, much as he had in days long gone, when he'd lost himself inside of Skeletor, but this was different. He appeared rattled, as if something had shaken him to his very core, and she was determined to find out what it was.

"Why have you have left Trap-Jaw to his own devices?" he asked, avoiding her question.

"Trap-Jaw is not the threat here," she replied. "At least not enough of one to worry about with war on the horizon."

"Agreed," he conceded, "though I don't trust him to wander the city alone."

"He's being watched," she replied. "I arranged it before I left him. He doesn't even know. The guards are very discreet."

"He knows," Skeletor said drolly. "He's not an idiot. Still, it doesn't really matter."

Evelyn sighed in exasperation. "What is going on?" she demanded, unwilling to let his steer the conversation way from the truth. "Why are you keeping secrets from me?"

"What secrets would those be?" he asked.

"I don't know, and that's the problem," she replied. "Our time together over the years has been tumultuous, if you've forgotten. I thought that the lies and deceit were behind us. Apparently, I was wrong."

Skeletor sighed lightly. "Back then I kept things from you because I didn't trust you, nor anyone that I had surrounded myself with. My madness had the

added side effect of an incredible paranoia. Anything I keep from you now is purely for your own good, because I care for you.”

“You know I don’t need protecting,” she argued. “You said as much just recently. I’m not a weak little girl. Hell, I wasn’t weak even when I first met you. I was more powerful than you were, even if you don’t remember that fact.”

“I seem to remember besting you,” he replied.

“Oh, Darling, I let you win,” she said with a scoff. “I’ve just never had the heart to tell you. We’ve both used each other over the years, but I’d hoped that all of that was behind us. I’m willing to ignore your unwanted attempt to protect me from the truth,” she continued, “on the condition that you tell me what has you so rattled. Now.”

“Draco was here,” Skeletor said bluntly. “In our private chambers.” Evelyn gasped audibly, but he pressed on before she could respond. “He stunned me with some kind of alien weapon. I was unable to move. He used the opportunity not to kill me, but to speak. At length. He told me that we have a connection.”

“We already suspected that he knew your mother somehow, or at least knew of her,” she replied. The fact that the Horde emissary had been within the privacy of her bedroom, in her childhood home no less, infuriated her, but the why of it mattered more at the moment than the how. “It can’t be just that.”

“No, it’s not just that,” he admitted. “Our connection is something that he cares about more than I do, actually. Enough that he extended an offer for me to rejoin The Horde.”

“You’re not actually considering it, are you?” she asked, shocked that such an offer would be made at all. It couldn’t have come from Hordak. The Horde’s leader hated them both, and for good reason. Perhaps this Draco character’s ambition outweighed his intelligence.

Skeletor scoffed. “Of course I’m not considering it. At least not legitimately. I do have to admit however that accepting such an offer might give me an advantage I wouldn’t otherwise have. A chance to cause some real damage from the inside.”

“And what?” she asked. “Assassinate Hordak? You’ve tried to kill him before, several times I might add, and you’ve never been successful.”

“No, but without Adam and Adora here, there is no one stronger than myself standing between Hordak and the annihilation of everything as we know it,” he said. “I need to consider any options presented to me, even the most unlikely.”

"It's suicide," Evelyn argued, "and more than that, it flies in the face of the plans we've already laid out with Teela and the other monarchs and leaders around the globe."

"The day I care about Teela and the others is the day I weep at my own weakness," he replied.

"It's not weakness to care about your family," she retorted. "And besides, I know you that do care for them. Especially your niece. You see a bit of yourself in her."

"But she's not here," he replied angrily, "nor is Adam. And even if he was, the Power of Grayskull left him long ago."

"I have a feeling that that might have changed in their absence," she replied. "Or do you really think Veena would send them on a secret mission just for her own amusement? The gods aren't just going to sit around and wait for Hordak to destroy everything that they've created. Don't let your pride fool you, my love. Surely she has many game pieces in play and you are but one of them."

"You may be right," he conceded, "but can we afford to take that chance? The goddess has claimed that Adam and Adora would return, but do we take her at her word? What have the gods ever done for us, Evelyn?"

"They've given me you, and that's enough," she replied. "Just don't keep anything like that from me again."

He nodded in response as he rose from his throne and made his way to her. Pulling her into his arms, he pressed his skull to her forehead gently. "I won't. I just want us to survive."

"Then we need to stop wasting time exploring our options and just pick one," she said. "We need to act."

"You're right, of course," he replied as he released her. "I wish now that I'd had the wisdom to listen to your council during the war with He-Man. If I had, things would have been very different."

"There's no use dwelling in the past," she said. "It's our future we need to worry about."

"Again, you're right," he acknowledged. "I've been distracted long enough. I think it's time we truly prepared for the invasion. We need to reestablish contact with Eternia."

• • •

The Sorceress Teela 'Na lead Dare deep into Castle Grayskull. Within the Everdream, askew from the mortal plane, Dare saw the structure in a new light, its incidele magics laid bare before his young eyes. Though he now walked in the body of a man, the sight of it all amazed his adolescent mind. No one in his study classes back at the palace would believe him. He'd heard many tales of the castle, but before today, they'd been just that: stories. Now the structure was suddenly and strikingly real, even more than when he'd been in the waking world, for now he could see its mysteries more clearly. It was as if he could see the worksmanship itself that went into creating it, the spells before him like an open book.

Dare understood magic in ways that others couldn't understand. Things that took other people years of practice and discipline were like remembering to breathe or swallow for him. Still, his mastery over it was small and he certainly didn't understand how he was supposed to help stop Hordak. He didn't even know anything about the creature, outside of his immense evil. What good would a boy be against that, much less here in the Everdream, where people could walk through him as if he were a mere ghost? However, that's what his grandmother and Zoar had told him, that he had his own role to play in the impending war. He didn't understand it, but it was apparently the truth. Still, he felt that he deserved at least some answers. "Grandmother, where is it exactly that we are going?"

"I'm taking you to an artifact called the Magic Mirror," she replied. "During my time as Sorceress of Castle Grayskull, I kept it in my bedchambers, to warn your father if He-Man was needed. This castle, however, is not from our time period, and the mirror is located elsewhere, hidden away."

"But how will a mirror help us?" he asked.

"It's no ordinary mirror," she said. "With it, we can see things that would not normally be visible to us and my belief is that, with your abilities, that sight will be even more powerful. I intend to use it to study Hordak and his history. It's about time that the source of that monster's power is revealed to us, so that we can put an end to him once and for all."

"Doesn't he just use magic?" Dare asked.

"Yes, and no," she answered. "I feel that there is more to him and his long life than just magic. There must be more to the hold he has over his people than just pure will and dominance. The answer to that mystery is what we seek."

Guiding the boy further into the depths of the castle, Teela 'Na brought the two of them to a wooden door. Within the magic of the Everdream, Dare could see that the door was covered in illuminated runes. "What are those? More spells?" he asked.

The Sorceress smiled. "Yes, Dare. Very good. They are spells of protection to keep this artifact out of the hands of those who would use it for evil. We, however, have a key." She placed her hand upon the door, and the runes faded, soon disappearing altogether. Upon the click of a latch, the door opened with a slight creak. It occurred to Dare that this door had not been opened for many years.

The Sorceress motioned for him to enter first and he did so only to find that, other than the mirror, the room was completely empty. It stood alone against the far wall. Contained within an hourglass-shaped frame, the surface of the mirror was like none he'd ever seen. It reflected his image as a regular mirror would, but within its hologram-like surface, he could also see other reflections refracting within the glass. The surface appeared almost like a multi-faceted diamond, the many other reflections shown within not his at all, but rather of other times, other places and people he didn't recognize.

"Amazing, isn't it?" his grandmother asked.

"Yes," he replied simply, not having the words to describe how the mirror made him feel. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Few have," she said. "It has been here in this castle for many years, peering into the lives of others for it itself has none to speak of." The soft quietness of her voice making Dare realize for the first time just how lonely his grandmother must have been, locked up in this castle for years on end, having little contact with the outside world. She'd said before that during her time here, she'd kept the Magic Mirror in her personal chambers. The thought of it made him sad for her. Alone at the edge of the Light Hemisphere, she'd once held a silent vigil here, protecting the light half of the world from the dark. It was a vigil that she'd spent alone, with only the faces in the mirror to keep her company until the coming of He-Man had been necessary, at which time Dare's Grandfather Duncan had brought the boy's father Adam here to receive the power of Grayskull. Teela was the Sorceress's daughter, a fact she hadn't learned until just before her own mother's death. "Did you use the mirror to watch my mother?" he asked.

"I looked in on her from time to time," The Sorceress replied quietly, though from her expression it was apparent that she'd used it to watch her daughter often, unable to interact with Teela as a mother while the girl grew up.

Before Dare could inquire further, she walked toward the mirror, waving her hand over its surface. Upon the mirror's face, Dare could see the infinite reflections rapidly begin to rotate and cycle in a kaleidoscopic swirl of color, each rotation showing less and less reflections until, after a long moment, it fell upon one lone individual: Hordak. The creature was clad in his black armor of war, the remains of a beautiful castle, as unlike Castle Grayskull as Dare could imagine, behind him. The castle within the mirror was blackened by flames, some of which still licked the air behind the Horde leader. "What are we seeing?" he asked.

"Etheria. The present," the Sorceress answered, "which, unfortunately, we can do nothing about. What we want is deeper. Much deeper." Waving her hand over the looking glass once again, the image moved closer to Hordak, bringing his grotesque face into view before zooming ever closer until it stopped, just above the center point of his two eyes. "Within his mind's eye," she told him. "That is where we must search. I need your help with this part."

"But what can I do?" he asked.

"You can help enhance my own power, to go further into the mirror than I ever have before," she replied. "Just hold my hand and I'll do the rest. On this side of the Magic Mirror, we are safe from him. There is nothing to fear."

"I believe you," Dare lied as he reached out and took her hand as she instructed, only this time it wasn't like before, when she'd first led him through the Everdream. This time he could feel his own magics, which he'd only slightly tapped into before, brought to the forefront and sent into her. It was an incredible amount of energy that was surging into her. It couldn't all be from him, could it? Reaching out, The Sorceress once again waved her hand over the mirror, now plunging its view into Hordak's mind. Suddenly, the face of the mirror went completely black and Dare feared that they had lost whatever connection they'd had, but he soon saw the smallest flicker of light within the black surface. Continuing to move closer to the source of the bright spot in the darkness, Dare recognized that it was a torch and, illuminated by it, Hordak himself.

It was in fact a much younger Hordak, appearing to be no more than an adolescent boy. He stood in a cave, deep enough in the bowels of whatever planet he was on that, save for the torch he carried, he was bathed in complete darkness. Before the young Hordak was a shrine of some sort, bearing the skull of the someone who shared the Horde leader's mysterious race. Before it was a bowl of

oil, which the alien youth used his torch to light. Upon the lighting of the bowl, the skull seemed to come alive in the light of the fire; the flicker of shadows over its surfaces making it appear animated.

"I have come, Lord Prime," Dare and the Sorceress heard the young Hordak say, though oceans of time separated them from the moment in which this memory actually happened. "I have done as you commanded. I have killed him."

"Place your father's heart before me," the skull replied in a chill whisper. "I trust you've brought it, as I asked?" Hordak pulled a wet leather sack from his belt and pulled it open, letting the still-bloody heart tumble out onto the shrine. Dare looked toward his Grandmother in fear, but she merely looked on. After a moment, he turned back to the mirror. There was a war coming. Surely, he'd have to see things he would rather avoid if he were going to help fight it. The flames before the skull flickered, giving it the appearance of a sickly grin. "Very good," the skull said. "And with this offering, what is it you seek to gain from me?"

"Power, Lord Prime," Hordak said. "Power over death itself."

"That will require more than just this one sacrifice, boy. The cost of such a request would be many souls indeed. More than any one man could give me."

"If you grant me the power I require, I will have all of time to give them to you, Lord Prime."

After a long moment, the skull spoke once more. "Yes, you would indeed. In repayment for the offering you have made, I will grant you an unnaturally long life, but it is not just the spirits of the dead that I desire, but that of the living, and I need many more than just yours. Find others to follow you and bind your lifeforce to theirs. Make yourself legion, young Hordak. Only then will I grant you what you seek. Only then will you truly conquer death."

With those words, the image faded, the mirror returning to its natural state. "But what does it mean?" Dare asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," the Sorceress confessed.

"What or who is Lord Prime?" Dare continued. "Some kind of god?"

"Certainly not," the Sorceress replied. "Perhaps some ancient sorcerer who kept his spirit alive after he died. I afraid I don't know. It appears we'll have to dig deeper."

19.

GATHERING FORCES

The following morning, Evelyn awoke early to find that Skeletor had already left their chambers. She slipped on her new armor. Exiting their room, she headed toward her secret place, somewhere even Skeletor didn't know about. Someplace safe from any prying eyes. She had a secret too. Reaching the nondescript, empty wall hidden within the palace, she opened the camouflaged door and stepped inside, letting it slide closed behind her. Snapping her fingers, a lone torch blazed to life on the wall, illuminating the small room. The old bedroll she'd called her own still lay before her, remaining from her time living as a hermit in the ruins of this temple, before Skeletor had returned from his Fright Zone imprisonment and returned it to its former glory. This is where she'd been when King Adam had come to ask for her aid in finding his father, where she'd been quietly content as the Sorceress of Zalesia, alone amidst the surrounding desert before the city had been resurrected. Things were simpler then. She was happy to have her beloved back, was glad to see Zalesia restored to glory, but she felt a soft pang of nostalgia for her time alone here, living in this room, feeling the living pulse of the planet beneath her. In the years since, her connection to the planet had waned. Her lover's return had made him the most powerful sorcerer in the land once more, and his presence blocked her connection to a degree, absorbing her magic in a way. Except here.

This room was long-protected by a spell of her own design to keep it secret, even from him. Here, her magic was the strongest. Here, she was once again the Sorceress of Zalesia in more than just name only.

Evelyn knelt on her bedroll, which she'd pulled into the center of the room. Placing her hands palms-down on her thighs, she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, meditating quietly until she could feel the pace of her breathing synching with the rhythmic pulse of the world's magics. If the planet were a body, and magic its blood, Zalesia would be one of Tellus's main organs. Once more, she could feel the power flowing all around her and within her. Her entire body tingled as she opened herself up to it. Her heartbeat quickened as if the touch she felt were that of a lover after a long separation. Her cheeks flushed with passion for the power she felt both surging within her and coursing through her to once again join the flow of the ley lines that carried it throughout the world. Long before she'd seen Keldor's face as a young woman, power had been her first love. Here, in her secret place, she felt its caress again for the first time in years, the magic that flowed through the planet hers again.

Stretching outward, she searched for anything amiss, anything that would indicate The Horde's presence. With the aid of a Cosmic Key, Draco could have come from anywhere, but she searched nonetheless. She reached from one end of the planet to the other, looking for both his presence and Hordak's, but even with the added boost to her power, she could find nothing. Either they were far more powerful than she was, or they weren't here. She hoped that it was the latter.

■ ■ ■

Duncan and Randor, along with the Etherian rebels and the citizens they'd brought with them, entered Eternia's city gates feeling a mixture of both relief and sadness. Each of them in turn was relieved to be at least temporarily safe from The Horde, but they were also feeling the sting of loss. Many of the Etherians had lost friends and family in the attack back home and Duncan knew that his old friend Randor wished that they'd been able to bring more of them here with them before the portal had closed. He did too, but regardless of what he wished, he knew that they'd done the best they could with what little time they'd had. The Horde attack had been at least somewhat expected due to the eclipse, but the ferocity and suddenness of it had shocked even those among them who'd felt prepared. Such was the danger of an enemy like Hordak possessing a Cosmic Key. With it, they'd gotten through Bright Moon's defences with no warning given. It made the system

that Duncan had been working on for the past several years irrelevant, but he'd had a secondary plan for it all along. Unfortunately, there was an element that he just couldn't crack. If there were any time to get that problem solved, now was that time. Before the group could even reach the doors of Eternos Palace, Teela met them in the courtyard, rushing to her father, who met her embrace eagerly. "You're back," she said, holding Duncan tight to her. "I came as soon as your arrival was reported to me."

"We've only just arrived," he replied, "and we brought some friends. I hate to be diplomatic when all I want is to speak with my daughter, but they've suffered many losses, including their queen. It might be good for them to hear some kind words from another."

Teela nodded as she let him go. She moved toward her father-in-law Randor who also embraced her. "Have Adam and Adora returned?" he asked hurriedly.

"No," Teela replied, apparently unable to elaborate further. "And there are other things we must discuss as well. But first—" she trailed off as she pulled away from her father-in-law to address the Etherian rebels and refugees who stood nearby, looking eagerly in her direction. Duncan knew that the crowd, whose faces ran the gamut of emotions, tugged at his daughter's heart strings. Now, more than ever, they needed to feel welcomed and cared for.

"Dearest guests," she began, "I welcome you to the kingdom of Eternia, of the planet Tellus. I only wish your coming here were under better circumstances. I am Teela, the queen of this kingdom. I want you to know that you are all welcome to stay here until it is safe for you to return home. If all goes well, and the gods are with us, Hordak will be defeated and that is exactly what you will be able to do; to return to your homes safe from the threat of The Horde, finally able to rebuild your war-torn lands. Additionally, if you should choose to stay with us, you may do so as Eternian citizens." Duncan saw a few smiles amongst the crowd, but the prevailing expression was still one of fear. While speaking of a future without The Horde was a pleasant distraction, the war was not over and the Etherians knew that all too well. Having battled against Hordak for years, that truth was nothing new to them. Speaking once again, Teela apparently aimed to address those concerns head on. "Unfortunately, the war you have temporarily escaped is now on its way here. With the aid of his Cosmic Keys, Hordak and his forces could arrive at any time. In the meantime, we will be doing everything in our power to prepare for him. Those of you who wish to fight alongside us are most welcome to do so. Those who don't, I want you to know that we will do everything we can to keep you safe and end Hordak's threat once and for all."

A small smattering of applause broke out, but was short-lived. Afterward, several of the rebels and citizens approached Teela and pledged themselves to the Eternian army. Looking on, Duncan couldn't help but be proud of his daughter. She was a fine queen, and had grown from the tempestuous girl he remembered into a fine woman. When she was free, she approached him once more. "Your project, father," she began, "it's been some time since we've spoken of it. Have you made any progress?"

"Yes, but there's still a critical failure somewhere in the system," he replied. "I just can't seem to give it enough power."

"Perhaps I could be of some help?" Gwildor asked, dusting off his elaborate robes as he walked toward them. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help but overhear you," he said shamefully. "I'm not one to pry. It's these big ears. I just can't help it," he said with a short laugh.

"It's alright, Gwildor," Duncan replied. "Any help at all would be much appreciated. Surely the man who created the Cosmic Key can sort it out."

Gwildor smiled sheepishly. "Indeed, though I wish in retrospect that I'd never created the blasted thing. We surely wouldn't be in this position if I hadn't. I hope you all know that I only did so in the interest of science, and the love of exploration. I once dreamt of travelling quickly to new worlds, meeting new people. I just didn't think it would be because those very people were threatened by my invention."

"Not your invention, Gwildor," Randor clarified. "Hordak. Any tool can be dangerous in the wrong hands. You can't blame the person who made the tool."

"Especially when the invention itself is so wondrous," Teela added. "I can understand where your desire to create it came from, Gwildor. None of this is your fault, you must remember that."

"I thank you, my new friends," Gwildor said. "You are indeed most gracious hosts. Still, it has indeed fallen into the wrong hands, and now it's put countless people in danger. My helping Man-At-Arms here with whatever he's working on will be just the first step in trying to make things right, my fault or no." Glancing up at Duncan, the diminutive Thenurian motioned them toward the palace. "Be that as it may, if we hope to stop Hordak, we have very little time to do so, I fear. Please, show me the way, and I'll do what I can to help you."

20.

DEEPER STILL

Dare looked on as his grandmother, still holding onto his hand, again waved her own over the Magic Mirror. "We must go deeper into the mind of Hordak," she told him, "no matter how unpleasant." She smiled warmly, trying to assuage his fear. It didn't help.

The mirror shimmered and settled on the image of the creature who meant to recreate the universe in his horrific image for a second time. Dare was terrified as he looked upon the countenance of pure evil within the mirror's glass, but he remained silent. He needed to be strong. He was a warrior now, like his father. He noticed that Hordak was older in this memory, but the Horde leader would still be considered a young man by most. Wearing the black robes of a mage, their enemy stood amidst the aftermath of a great battle, surrounded by the dead. Ahead of him, the remnants of an alien army rushed to meet him. No, Dare realized, it wasn't the aftermath at all, for the fight still raged on. It was Hordak that had fought and killed these men, and he'd apparently done it alone. "Come to me, wretches!" Hordak roared. "Come and I will grant you death, if that is what you choose!" The fur-adorned barbarian horde shouted battle cries as they approached with their ancient bladed weapons drawn, eager to avenge their fallen comrades. As they

ran, Hordak began moving his arms in a practiced motion, chanting an incantation in a tongue that Dare failed to understand or recognize. His arms began to emit a strange glow and were soon crackling with energy. With the final word of his spell, the foul creature shot his hands forward, unleashing the energy that roiled within him outward toward his attackers. Powerful bolts of red lightning struck them head on, killing many of them instantly. Those who remained alive after his magical attack writhed in pain on the ground. The few who'd escaped the blasts stopped dead in their tracks and stared in disbelief. "Is this what you want?" Hordak asked them. "You've seen me destroy so many already. Would you give your lives as foolishly as they have?"

One of the aliens, of a species that Dare couldn't identify, stepped forward. Dare noticed that the other warriors treated him with deference. The boy assumed that this one was some type of king or leader. He wasn't sure what language Hordak or the aliens were speaking, but he found that he could somehow understand them, much as he could understand Cringer. Stealing a glance at his grandmother, he saw that she understood them too, likely due to her similar connection to the magics that surrounded them. "When you came to this planet, Hordak," the barbarian began, "you told us that you merely wished to learn the old ways from the men in the mountains. Now, they all are slain and you continue by laying waste to the rest of us. To what end, creature? What is it that you want from me?"

"I learned from those who dwelled in the mountains as I have from many others like them over the years," Hordak replied. "Knowledge is power, Rathar-Khan, and now their knowledge is mine and mine alone. What I want from you is something else entirely."

"And what is that?" Rathar-Khan asked.

Hordak approached the barbarian leader nonchalantly, his hands clasped behind him. "I want your army." The black-armored creature raised his right hand and indicated those who stood behind Rathar-Khan. "Those that remain, at least. In exchange for your lives, I will give you the great honor of serving me."

"And supposing we refuse?" Rathar-Khan challenged.

Hordak laughed lightly. "Well, in that case, I would simply kill the rest of you. However," he said, raising his right index finger as he paused, "you will not refuse."

"How can you know that?" Rathar-Khan asked.

"Because I will not allow you to," Hordak replied with a cold grin, fangs bared. "Long before I came here, I learned the most powerful magic of all from my Lord Prime. The power over life itself. Specifically, yours. First, you will belong to me, and then, after your death, you will belong to him." Moving quickly, Hordak extended his index finger directly at Rathar-Khan's face. A black tendril, like living smoke, lashed out from his hand and entered the barbarian leader in a space just above the center of his eyes. Dare remembered it as the mind's eye, as his grandmother had just recently taught him. Withdrawing his hand moments later, the sorcerer lowered it to his side, the black tendril disappearing as he did so. Dare and the Sorceress looked on as Hordak's red eyes grew black as pitch as he spoke. "Now, you will kneel."

With his soldiers looking on in shocked awe, Rathar-Khan dropped to his knees before the black-clad creature that now controlled him. "I swear my allegiance to you, Lord Hordak."

"And you?" Hordak asked of the remaining men. While many knelt out of fear, there were still enough left standing to visibly anger him. "So be it," he snarled. "All of you, then." With a speed that startled the onlooking Dare, Hordak shot his hands outward toward the army once more, but this time instead of lightning, more smoke-like tendrils shot forth, quickly attaching themselves to the fleeing soldiers, who stopped in their tracks as soon as the tendrils connected. In mere seconds, the writhing smoke had connected with each remaining survivor, only needing to maintain contact with them for a short time before their will was no longer their own, but Hordak's. Each man faced his new master in turn and kneeled as Rathar-Khan had earlier. "And now, my Horde," Hordak began, "what do you have to say to the one who has so graciously spared your lives, honoring you with the gift of eternal servitude in both life and death?"

"All hail Hordak," the fledgling Horde army shouted in unison.

With a grin, the newly appointed leader of The Horde walked amongst his thralls, addressing them all as he did so. "Good. I grow tired of these pointless and annoying resistances. From now on, as I learn the dark arts, I will have an army at my side. Together, along with what I'm sure will be many more brothers and sisters to come, we will cut a swath through the galaxies. Each of you will, in turn, feed my power and keep me strong. Lord Prime has gifted me with an unnaturally long life. Now, through you and others I will have the strength to make such a life worth living. From now on I—" he stopped. In that moment, the image within the mirror flickered violently. The Horde leader within the memory quickly aged to his current appearance, clad in his familiar black armor, as the memory around him faded to darkness once more. He appeared confused before becoming angry. "This is not

a part of this memory," he said aloud. "I would never reveal the source of my power to these pitiful fools. No, something else is happening here. Some kind of interference." Hordak turned, searching outward for the source and, to Dare's horror, looked right at him and his grandmother. "Ah, the Magic Mirror. It sees both ways, if one knows how to look, Sorceress, and the one with you burns like a beacon," he said, addressing them through the reflective glass. "So, you've peered into my past, as if it makes any difference. Foolish woman. You think you can stop me? You and this mere boy?" He scoffed and Dare felt a cold shiver run down his spine. As terrifying as it was that Hordak could see them at all, it was even more so that he could see Dare as he truly was: a child. "You are mistaken." Without warning, the image of Hordak disappeared and the Magic Mirror cracked violently, causing both Dare and the Sorceress to leap back in startled shock, letting go of each other's hands in the process.

"I didn't think he could do that," Dare said.

"I didn't either," she admitted, "however, we got what we were after. We now know that Hordak is, with the possible rare exception, linked to every one of his soldiers. They are what feed him; what give him his power."

"But how do we stop him?" Dare asked.

"If we can sever those links," she explained, "then we can weaken Hordak enough that he can finally be defeated once and for all, something even King Grayskull was unable to do, for Hordak still had the power of his army behind him on that fateful day."

"But we can't do that unless we're near him," Dare reasoned, "and he's not here yet, so what do we do in the meantime?"

Her voice took on a solemn tone. "We prepare you, young Dare, for his arrival."

• • •

"So, what are we looking at, here?" Scrollos asked. Having disappeared during the Horde Emmissary's appearance during the council meeting, he'd since returned, if only to plague Duncan with questions. The Eternian Man-At-Arms found his presence terribly irksome, but he respected his daughter's wishes, and she wished for Duncan to keep the historian safe. That meant of course, that the so-

called “Keeper of the Scrolls” had to be by his side always, and that was a distraction that the Eternian Man-At-Arms surely didn’t need, especially now. Thankfully, he also had Mekaneck and the diminutive inventor Gwildor with him. They could field some of Scrolllos’s ceaseless questions and spare him from having to do so. As someone whose job it was to record history, the scribe was infuriatingly inquisitive and Duncan had to remind himself often that this was not his fault. The man was, in fact, under a spell cast upon him by Queen Veena, the first Sorceress of Grayskull, his will not entirely his own. Duncan wondered if Veena was using her servant even now to somehow keep tabs on them. With the end times within sight, it was possible that the future may be unclear even the Goddess herself.

“Oh, you’ve created something extraordinary here, Man-At-Arms,” Gwildor said. The four of them were gathered around Duncan’s secret project, the one he’d been unable to make work. “This, Scrolllos,” the Thenurian explained, “is a magnetic pulse emitter, though it is on a larger scale than any I’ve ever seen. They usually fit in your hand.” The box before them was nearly the size of one of their computer consoles.

“The idea,” Duncan began, “was originally to make some kind of shield that could surround the planet and repel any alien forces that might attack.”

“Like The Horde,” Scrolllos said.

“Well, yes, that was the idea in the beginning,” Duncan replied, “but it didn’t take long for me to figure out that, at least in the case of the Horde army, that just wouldn’t work.”

“Because with the Cosmic Key, Hordak could just open a portal within the shield,” Mekaneck said.

“Exactly. So instead, I rethought the thing from the ground up,” Duncan continued. “Rather than create a magnetic field that would have to be self-sustaining, I’d make a machine that would create one pulse; a single, powerful pulse that would obliterate any computer systems on the planet.”

“But that would include our own,” Mekaneck said.

“Indeed, it would,” Duncan confirmed. “Such a thing would only be a last resort, like a dead-man’s switch. It’d take out the invading Horde ships, but it’d also send us back to Preternian times. Figuratively speaking, of course,” he added. “But it doesn’t even matter, because I’ve never been able to figure out how to generate enough power to cause such a blast. We just don’t have the means. Ironically, the technology we’d need to destroy technology just doesn’t exist.”

"Sure, it does," Gwildor said, a quizzical look upon his face. His eyes squinted in thought. "Just judging by what I can see here, I assume that you're using galvatran energy?" the inventor asked.

"Well, yes," Duncan replied. "It's how we power everything here."

"So, you have yet to harness neutrinos?" Gwildor asked. "I've been gone from Tellus for so long, I'd just assumed you had."

"No," Duncan answered. "We know of their existence, but any attempts to use them have come up short."

"Then I guess it's your lucky day," Gwildor replied. "I happen to know just how to do such a thing. Neutrinos are what the Cosmic Key runs on, don't you know? More than that, I was doing added research into the field over in the Etherian dimension before Hordak snatched me up and locked me away. Best of all, neutrinos aren't effected by magnetism, so your blast won't disable the Cosmic Key, and we can still send the Etherians home when this is all over."

Duncan pulled Gwildor into a quick embrace, kissing him atop his mass of untamed hair. "Gwildor, you're beautiful!" he exclaimed. "You may have just saved us all."

Gwildor blushed sheepishly. "Don't flatter me too much, I might let it go to my head." Pausing a moment, he continued, sobered by a thought. "You do realize of course that this will merely stop any attacks from the air? You'll still have a heck of a ground war to deal with."

"I'd rather fight face-to-face any day," Duncan replied. "Let them come."

• • •

The following morning, Randor rose from his seated position as Teela emerged from her chambers in full battle-dress. It'd been several years since the queen had worn the familiar outfit. It had been enhanced from the days of her early adventures, but it still fit as if not a single day had passed. In fact, Randor would wager that she was in better form now than ever. She'd never been one to be an idle queen, and she'd had kept up her intense physical training over the years, especially since the birth of her son, Dare. Sheathing her sword as she exited, Teela gave him a forced smile. She was ready for battle, but Randor knew that her heart was filled with worry. Not just for Adam, who'd been missing for many days

now, along with his twin sister Adora, but for Dare, whom Randor had learned from Teela was now in a magic-induced sleep within the reborn Castle Grayskull that he'd yet to awake from. She'd assured him that Dare was well-protected, both his physical form by Veena herself, and his spirit, which was being guided in the Everdream by Teela's mother, Teela 'Na, who Randor had once known as the Sorceress of Grayskull during the time of He-Man.

As a man who'd secretly known that his son was the warrior hero He-Man, Randor understood her worry more than she could know. Even with his son's strength, Randor always worried when evil struck and He-Man was needed. He never knew if it would be the last time that he would see his son. In many ways, the day that Randor had found out Adam had given up his power as He-Man had been the best day of his life, or so he'd thought. Now, he wished that his son were here, powered by Grayskull, so that He-Man could put an end to Hordak's threat. The fact that he wasn't caused a knot of fear to settle in the pit of Randor's stomach that he'd tried hard to ignore, but now that he had returned from Etheria with Duncan and the others, and Adam had still to return from his own journey, that sensation had grown even stronger. He kept such things to himself, of course. Teela had enough to worry about on her own. "Father," she said in an attempt at a cheerful tone, "I see you've donned your armor."

"And you as well," he replied.

"Yes," she said. "I'm afraid that if I don't prepare now, it'll be too late to later."

"I understand," he replied, joining her as she walked. "I feel the same way. The threat of Hordak looms over us all. We know he's coming. In many ways, I wish he'd just arrive and let the battle begin. It'd be better than all of this waiting around." She nodded. He could see by her expression that she shared his dread; the uneasy feeling of knowing that their enemy could arrive at any second, with the agonizing knowledge that they could do little to stop him without He-Man.

"As such, I thought it time that we mobilize," she said. "I've been awaiting word from Keldor, but he's been silent for days now."

"Is that something to be concerned about?" he asked.

"Not in the way you're thinking," she answered. "Keldor is, as strange as it may seem, firmly entrenched on our side. It's not unusual for him to keep a low profile. He always has before, but this time it's different. This entire plan is his. Many of the council members will be leaving their homelands relatively unprotected, committing most of their people to the towers instead. It's incredibly risky, but Keldor swears that the towers must factor into Hordak's plan and are more

important than anything else when it comes to defense. Their arrival can't be coincidence. Now, on top of all that, we have word from our scouts there that the Three Towers themselves are moving."

"Moving?" Randor asked, confused.

"Yes," she confirmed. "The two outermost towers are moving closer to the Central one, located within the Sands of Time. It's like they're converging. It was slow at first, almost imperceptible, but they move faster each day, hovering above the ground on their way toward the center."

"But what does that mean for our plans?" he asked.

"For now, each group, the Eternians at Zoar Tower and the other assembled armies at Viper Tower, will move with them," Teela replied. "Personally, I say if the towers converge before Hordak arrives, it'll be all the better. At least then we'll have a united front rather than having our forces scattered."

"That's one way of looking at it," Randor admitted. "Another is that, with all of our forces grouped together, it'll be that much easier for Hordak to strike us from the air and simply wipe us all out in one fell swoop."

"My father's working on a solution to that particular problem," she said, "along with Mekaneck and Gwildor. If anyone can solve it, it's those three. Any one of them is a technological genius in his own right. The three of them together should be able to handle it."

"Let's hope you're right," Randor replied.

"I have to be," she said, "or we're all dead." Randor had no response. She was right.

As they entered the war room, several of the current Masters rose to greet them. "Oh, sit down," Teela commanded. "I thank you, but we don't have time for the usual formalities. What news do we have?"

The Masters took their seats, apart from Clamp Champ, who approached them both, a worried look in his eyes. Clamp Champ, who's birth name was Raenius, had long been groomed by Teela's father to take his place. The elder man had simply never retired. Still, Raenius was by all accounts the right man for the job, and with her father busy with Gwildor and Mekaneck, she'd appointed him to fill her father's usual role in his stead. "We've had some peculiar readings, My Queen. All of our equipment is telling us that there is nothing in the surrounding orbit of Tellus, but there are other readings that would say otherwise, at least when

you look at the big picture. If you were to look at each instrument on its own, it wouldn't seem to see anything at all, but just a minor anomaly in the data. However, looking at the combination of all the independent reports, you see that each one has an anomaly of some sort, no matter how small." he asked. "That's just not something that happens. Ever. The only conclusion I can reach is that something must be interfering with our systems."

"What are you trying to say, Son?" Randor asked. "Spell it out so that even an old man can understand."

Raenius nodded, a bead of sweat forming on his brow as he spoke. He was more than just nervous, Randor realized. He was scared. "There's no reason our equipment would all show something strange at the same time," he began, "unless it was being interfered with by an outside source. We've been waiting for The Horde to arrive, but I think they're already here, cloaked somehow, just waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Teela asked, pulling the words from Randor's own thoughts.

"We don't know," Raenius said, "and I don't think we will know until it's too late." After a pause, he spoke up once again. "There is a positive to be taken from this, however."

"And what is that?" Randor asked.

"We're aware that they're up there," Raenius began, "but they don't know that we know. Maybe we can use that."

"Surprise them before they surprise us?" Teela asked.

"Something like that, yeah," Raenius replied.

"Then I'll holo my father and see how they are coming along," Teela said. "We may have a trick up our sleeve after all."

21.

BEGINNING OF THE END

Draco knelt in meditation aboard his starship, the planet Alpha Prime turning below him in its orbit. The Horde fleet was cloaked, hidden from the view of both the naked eye and the most sensitive of sensors that The Horde had yet encountered abroad. Hearing the door to his chambers open, Draco stood. Although he was irritated at the interruption, the Horde emissary calmly turned and greeted his visitor with a pleasant smile. “Welcome, Shadow Weaver. To what do I owe this honor?”

“I wish merely to speak with you,” she said in her hiss-like voice. “Alpha Prime lies beneath us, ripe for invasion, and yet Hordak insists that we wait.”

Draco nodded. “He must await the convergence of the Three Towers. You know this.”

“Yes, of course, but why? Why not stamp out any resistance now, ahead of that fateful moment? She-Ra is gone. I cannot sense her below, or anywhere else. Her brother has likewise disappeared. We should take advantage of this. You have our master’s ear more than I these days. Perhaps you can persuade him to invade now.”

Draco scoffed, shaking his head. "You know as well as I do that, whether I have his ear or not, Hordak will do as he pleases. I'm itching for a battle myself, so I understand your frustration. It's been too long since we've had a real war. These guerilla skirmishes with the Etherian rebellion are hardly satisfying."

"I'm not frustrated," Shadow Weaver argued, "I merely fear what will happen if we wait too long. I worry that the Twins of Power will return, as the prophecy states. Surely, She-Ra is one of them. Perhaps her brother has some kind of power as well?"

"It doesn't take much to deduce that he was the Eternian warrior known as He-Man," Draco countered, her eyes widening in response with a light hiss. Draco respected Shadow Weaver for keeping The Horde alive while Hordak was trapped within Despondos, but she wasn't the most intellectual creature he'd known. Still, it was his job to study the history of the worlds Hordak sought control over, as a means of finding the weaknesses of their people. It only made sense that he understood their enemy more than she did. "Yet, they are gone," he continued. "You must have more faith in our lord than that, you who are ever his faithful servant," Draco said sarcastically.

"I am that," she hissed, apparently missing his verbal jab, "but I am also a student of magic. Because of this, I know more of the prophecy than you do. I'm telling you, if the twins return, we can fail. Hordak can fail. If we strike now, our victory is certain."

Draco paused a moment before replying. "If Hordak heard you say that, he'd kill you for treason."

"That's why I'm not telling him," she countered. "I'm telling you. How much longer until the towers complete their convergence?"

"Less than two Etherian days," he answered.

"Then that is how much time we have to convince him," she said. "Although the convergence is important to his spell, I have a feeling that it means much more than just that. We must attack as soon as possible, before the Eternians and their allies know what hit them."

• • •

Draco took time to contemplate Shadow Weaver's words. In time, he concluded that she could be right. Besides the threat of the twins returning, it only made sense tactically to begin the invasion while the planet's forces were short a certain warrior princess. She-Ra had been more than just a thorn in Hordak's side. Draco was one of the few that knew that she had once been Despara, Hordak's adopted daughter. He'd been just as much in the dark as anyone else before her defection, but when he'd first taken Shadow Weaver's place as Hordak's confidant, he'd become privy to much information that had previously been kept from him. If the army below didn't have the might of She-Ra to protect them, then now was the perfect time to attack. He found himself repeating this almost as a mantra as he approached Hordak's throne room aboard the fleet's capital ship the following morning.

As the emissary approached the door, it opened on its own. Hordak was expecting him. This was not unusual. Over the years, Draco had found that his master often knew someone was coming before it happened, as if he knew where the members of his army were at all times. That talent didn't seem to extend to the former Despara however, preventing the Horde leader from achieving his final victory over the rebellion, something that Draco had often found curious. Perhaps her embracing the light had shielded her from his sight? Why else wouldn't Hordak have seen her defection coming? Simple hubris? If so, what else was there that he couldn't see? Couldn't control? Seeing his master sitting upon his throne, Draco shook the thought away. Hordak could sense fear. Draco certainly hoped that he couldn't also sense doubt. "My Lord," he began.

"You wish to know why we haven't attacked yet," Hordak said, interrupting him.

"Well, yes," Draco admitted. "Alpha Prime is ripe for the taking."

"Anything I choose to take is ripe for my taking of it," Hordak countered. "Who is there that is able to stop me?"

Your daughter's done an outstanding job so far, Draco thought, thankful that his mind was working faster than his tongue. An outburst like that and he would be leaving this ship by way of an airlock with no pressure suit. "Forgive me, Master. I know that you have your reasons for waiting, as you have your reasons for all things. I'm merely curious as to what that reason is. Your army is dying to spill blood on a planet-wide scale. It's been far too long. The men are restless."

"Then let them be restless," Hordak countered angrily. "I do not bow to them or to their wishes. They, and you, bow to mine."

"Of course, Lord Hordak, it's just that—"

Hordak stopped him with an exasperated sigh. "I must wait for the convergence because that is how I have foreseen it. All of this has happened a thousand times within my mind's eye. The towers will converge and I will use the blood of Grayskull to corrupt their power and take it for my own. I have planned for that very moment for longer than many within my legions of soldiers have been alive. I will not deviate from that plan and invite ruin. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Lord Hordak," Draco replied.

"Then be gone from my sight and do not trouble me further," Hordak commanded. "I have more important things to attend to than your petty concerns. A powerful sorceress has been prying into things that have long remained secret and I must shield myself from further interference from her and her companion. The war can wait until the convergence."

Draco simply bowed and made his way out. He didn't know what to make of Hordak's words. What sorceress was his master speaking of? Did this woman know some type of weakness of Hordak's that could be exploited? If so, then Hordak was playing a very dangerous game indeed by waiting to strike. Despite this, Draco would do as his master commanded. Shadow Weaver would just have to be patient and they'd both have to hope that the Twins of Power remained wherever they'd disappeared to.

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Teela was on her way to her father's workshop when her bracer chimed. It was an incoming holo from Zalesia. *It's about time*, she thought. Pressing a button on the bracer, she brought up an image of a hooded man, whose face remained hidden, and she knew that it could only be Keldor. He always did have a flair for the dramatic. "Keldor," she began, "I was wondering when we'd hear from you. Has everything been going according to plan on your end?"

"We've run into some," the man paused, pulling back his hood to reveal a familiar yellow/green skull wearing an unusual helmet, "complications," he finished. "I am Skeletor once more."

Teela gasped and stopped in her tracks. "By the gods, what has happened?"

"I'm afraid that that is far too much to get into over a holo transmission, but rest assured that, despite my appearance, I am still firmly on your side," he replied. "Due to a spell of Evelyn's, my mind will not succumb to Skeletor's madness."

"Thank Zoar for that," Teela responded. "We need you with us."

"I will be," he said.

"Good," she replied. "I'm on my way to meet my father in his workshop. We've come into some information, information too sensitive for me to share over this transmission, but I believe we can use it to our advantage. He's cooking something up down there with Gwildor and Mekaneck."

"Gwildor? I take it their mission was a success then?" Skeletor asked. It was then that Teela remembered that their travelling to Etheria had in fact been Keldor's idea; a part of his plan to stop Hordak once and for all.

"Yes, and Randor has returned safely also."

"Good," he said, almost surprisingly. "He was once a formidable warrior, and a fine leader. Having him with us can only be a good thing." Teela reasoned that that was as close as the man could get to saying he was happy to hear of his brother's safe return. "Keep us informed," Skeletor said. "Oh, and there is one other thing that you may have noticed. The towers are converging. I feel that when this happens, the time for Hordak's spell will have arrived. It must be what he is waiting for. Make any necessary preparations beforehand."

"We've recently discovered that ourselves and have already adjusted accordingly," she replied, "but thank you for the information." Skeletor merely nodded and ended the transmission soon after.

The Eternian queen was obviously concerned about the sudden news of Adam's uncle becoming Skeletor again and, if they survived this, she'd be sure to find out just exactly what had happened. In the meantime, outside of his appearance, he did seem to be himself and she frankly had no choice but to believe that he was. If he were truly walking a dark path again, there was little hope for any of them. She had to trust that whatever had happened to him could be undone and that he was right in thinking that the madness of Skeletor would not consume him as it once had.

Reaching her father Duncan's work shop, located on the lower levels of Eternos Palace, Teela entered to find the three men hard at work, with Scrollos nearby, observant as always. Hearing the door, her father turned to her, a warm

smile upon his face. "Teela!" Duncan exclaimed. "By the goddess, we've almost done it!"

"I take it that Gwildor was able to lend his skills to your project?" she asked.

"More than that, my dear," Duncan replied, "this Thenurian genius has cracked the problem altogether. We should have it running shortly."

"With one major caveat," Mekaneck interjected, raising his hand.

"And what's that?" Teela asked.

Duncan stopped while the other two men continued to work. "Well, it won't work as intended. Originally, I'd conceived of this as the power source for a planetary shield; something to keep The Horde from invading altogether. But it never worked, and with Hordak possessing a Cosmic Key, such a thing would be relatively pointless, anyway."

"It's just as well," Teela admitted, "since they are already here." All four men stopped what they were doing, their mouths agape. "It's alright," she assured them, "at least so far. Clamp Champ all but confirmed it. There's too many strange readings out there. Nothing concretely says they're here, but there are enough anomalies across all of our equipment that it adds up to something being very wrong out there. It's likely that the Horde fleet is cloaked somehow. The good news is that we're now aware of their presence, but they don't know that. For now, we're safe and potentially even have the drop on them."

"I don't understand," Mekaneck said. "Why don't they attack?"

"I just spoke with Keldor," she began, intentionally leaving out the news of the Zalesian king's transformation. There was no time for explanations, and she didn't have all the answers anyway. "The Three Towers are converging and that convergence is likely what Hordak has been waiting for. If we can manage to strike before then, we may have the upper hand, so it's of great interest to me what your machine does, father. If it's not a shield, then what is it?"

"A pulse," Duncan replied. "After harnessing neutrinos with Gwildor's help, there's enough power in this box to generate a magnetic pulse strong enough to knock their ships right out of orbit."

"And fry our own equipment, too," she countered. Her father's expression said it all, however. He was right. This was their only chance. She quickly nodded. "Do it," she said, "first thing tomorrow morning, if you can get it working by then. By Raenius's calculations, the towers will converge within two days. He couldn't nail

down an exact time, so we don't have the luxury of waiting. Besides, taking out their ships might thin their numbers, giving us a better chance of winning. Do it," she repeated. "I'll use my remaining time today to get word to Keldor and the rest of the Council on a secure transmission that The Horde can't intercept. Then," she paused, realizing the weight of her words, "we go to war."

• • •

That night, after Skeletor had been informed of the plan, he swore. "The damned fools will get us all killed if they're wrong," he said, moments after ending the holotransmission with Teela.

"But if they're right?" Evelyn pressed.

"Then we fight as we would in the days of old: with our magic; sword to sword; blaster to blaster. Anything more complicated than a plasma weapon will be rendered useless after they fire that pulse."

"I guess I'm lucky that nanites aren't magnetic," Trap Jaw said. The warrior had rejoined Skeletor and Evelyn in the royal couple's throne room. He wasn't sure that he believed The Horde was actually here. It seemed like a lot of guesswork to him and he didn't trust guesswork. It was likely that the Eternians would be crippling their own defenses, leaving themselves open for slaughter when Hordak really did arrive. "Any real machinery will be useless as rocks after that," he scoffed.

"Quite," Skeletor said.

"So what if they're wrong?" Trap Jaw asked.

"Then they're wrong," Evelyn replied, "and we're as good as dead. But they wouldn't shut down their own defenses if they weren't sure. I trust Teela's judgement."

"Speaking of trust, I don't appreciate your putting babysitters on my tail," Trap Jaw said.

"Trap Jaw, how long have we known each other?" Skeletor asked. "Of course I don't trust you. I'm no fool."

"Obviously not," Trap Jaw replied. "But foolish enough to make those guards plainly obvious. I spotted them immediately, but it hasn't stopped them from being a pain in my hide."

"You seem to be under the impression that we didn't want you to know," Evelyn countered. "We wanted you to be aware that you were being watched. To keep you honest."

"When has that ever worked?" Trap Jaw asked with a laugh. "Fine. You two prepare to fight your war with sticks and stones. Meanwhile, I have preparations of my own to make. I'm not going down without a fight."

With that, he left. Once he'd exited, Evelyn turned to her husband. "What do you think he's up to?"

"Whatever it is, we can't worry about it now," he answered, though she detected a note of resignation in his voice. "Like he said, we have work to do. We don't have time to concern ourselves with Trap Jaw any further."

• • •

Trap Jaw exited the palace with a grin lifting his upper lip. Those two idiots didn't know what was about to hit them. Or maybe they did. He'd forgotten that they'd once ranked among the members of The Horde, themselves. In his mind though, that knowledge just made them even stupider. They knew what was coming and yet they still sat there waiting for it. Not him. He'd agreed to stay and fight for them, but no agreement made with Skeletor was ever worth a goblin's ugly snout anyway. Even if he'd found Keldor in that temple when he'd first arrived and not that skull-faced ghost from his past, it wouldn't have made any difference. His plan remained unchanged. He'd committed to it before he'd even entered Tellus's atmosphere. He really should win an award for his acting ability after this is all over. Pretending to make nice with Skeletor after all the grief he'd caused him? The thought made his stomach turn. Making his way to the Zalesian treasury, the cyborg formed his mechanical arm into a laser cannon. Whoever the guards had been that Skeletor and his witch had put on his tail, they were as unperceptive as they were obvious, which was very. He hadn't just been taking an extended tour of the ancient city these past few days; he'd been casing it.

As he approached the treasury, the two Gar guarding the entrance crossed their spears, each weapon enhanced with a laser blaster at their tip. The guards'

weapons and armor may appear ancient, but they were actually modern and quite formidable. Raising his mechanical arm, Trap Jaw blasted both guards into oblivion, leaving nothing but black scorch marks on the stone steps where they'd stood just moments before. *Not formidable enough*, he thought. He'd of course had his new and improved cannon on a low setting when he'd feigned his attack on Skeletor. The skull-faced fool was actually vain enough to think that he'd blocked that blast on his own, with just his hand, but then of course he was. It was all a part of Trap Jaw's plan. Looking down toward the bracer on his left forearm, he pressed one of its buttons with the tip of his cannon. Shouldn't be long now.

Using the enhanced strength of his armored legs, the cyborg ran up the steps and violently kicked the door off its mounts and far into the treasury's main hall, unleashing a salvo of fire from his arm cannon at the guards inside as he entered. Alarms blared throughout the building as he made his way further inside. He hadn't planned on making this hit tonight, but if there really was a magnetic pulse that was going to short out all machinery on the planet in the morning, then he needed to board his ship and get the hell off this rock before that happened. He'd be damned if he was going to be stuck on this stupid planet. He'd wasted enough of his life here. Still, he wouldn't be leaving empty-handed. That wasn't his style. Trap Jaw headed for a smaller hall that his built-in sensors told him lead to a room full of metal: the treasure room. In the smaller quarters, he transformed his arm from a cannon into a large clamp. When a Gar opened the door at the end of the hall and ran for him, he simply grabbed the man and crushed him within the weapon, throwing the poor fool behind him. Another guard exited the door ahead just as Trap Jaw was approaching it, jabbing a spear toward his helmeted head. The cyborg turned and caught the weapon in his iron jaw, crushing it much to the shock of the man holding it. He leaned into the guard and headbutted him with a grunt, his metal helmet cracking the Gar's skull. Looking down at him, Trap Jaw spit out the fragments of the spear and scoffed. "The Gar used to be warriors. Now look at you. Peace has made you soft."

A further series of doors and several more guards later, he reached a sealed metal slab that lead to his destination. Transforming his mechanical arm back to its cannon configuration, he dialed down the emitter into a fine laser. He aimed it at the door and fired, using the laser to cut a neat, man-sized hole into the barrier before kicking it into the room beyond. He entered and found himself surrounded by wealth. The wealth of Zalesia. Maybe it wasn't the magical artifacts that the Zalesians were rumored to have hidden away, but it was wealth nonetheless, and that was enough for him. Several minutes later, longer than he was comfortable with, the whine of his ship filled his ears. He took cover as the ship blasted open the treasure room's right wall. He'd needed to be on-site to find this exact room,

his helmet's antenna emitting a signal that would let his ship know where he was. Now that it knew, there was no further use for subtlety. Standing, he watched as his ship's entrance ramp lowered and an old friend made his way down to join him.

"You moved the schedule up," Tri-Klops complained in his usual raspy, level tone.

"I didn't have time to let you know," Trap Jaw replied. "We're on a timetable here."

"I was having a bath," Tri-Klops said dryly.

"Damn your bath," Trap Jaw sneered. "Help me load this stuff up so we can get out of here."

"What's your hurry?" Tri-Klops asked. "Afraid Keldor's going to come down here and see me alive?"

"Skeletor actually, and judging by his reaction to your 'death,' I don't think he gives an Aquarian's gills as to whether you're alive or not."

Tri-Klops began gathering up various spoils along with his partner. "I'm hurt," he replied, though he obviously was not.

"Well, he'll be hurt when he finds out he's broke," Trap Jaw countered. "Come on."

Another guard rushed the room and Tri-Klops rotated his mechanical visor to its red eye, blasting a neat hole into the Gar with its laser. When no more appeared to be coming, he continued gathering. A short time later, after they'd filled the ship with every last bit it could carry, Tri-Klops entered the cockpit and began the liftoff sequence. As they rose above the treasury and into the skies, Skeletor and Evelyn exited the Temple of Zalesia in a rush, glaring in their direction, too far off to be of any real threat. Trap Jaw stood at the end of the entrance ramp as it began to rise, giving Skeletor an arm gesture that he was sure to recognize, even from that distance.

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On the ground below, Evelyn fumed. "My treasure! That belongs to my family! To our kingdom! We must launch and follow them!"

Skeletor turned to her, oddly calm. "Let them go."

"Let them go?!" she raged. "Are you mad?"

"Not mad enough to enter orbit with a thousand Horde ships awaiting us," he replied. "Such a thing would just lead to a confrontation with them and we can't allow them to realize that we know that they're there. As much as this betrayal hurts our kingdom, we must give Teela and the Eternians enough time to complete their device. Besides, if we don't win this war, our lack of funds will be the least of our worries."

Seeing his logic, her anger began to subside. "I suppose it should have been expected."

"It was," he countered. "But, in many ways, this is a better outcome than what I had anticipated. It's better to have Trap Jaw out of the picture now than to have him betray us in the midst of battle."

"A knife out of the fight entirely is better than one in your back," she reasoned.

"Yes. Besides," he looked up into the night sky and lowered his jaw in a familiar mock-grin, "I have a feeling that they won't make it very far."

• • •

"Did you see the look on his face?" Trap Jaw asked with a roaring laugh as he entered the cockpit, the planet growing ever smaller in the distance behind them.

"It's a skull," Tri-Klops said flatly, "he doesn't have 'looks.' He doesn't even have a face to have a look on, come to think of it."

Trap Jaw settled into the co-pilot's seat and put his feet up on the control board. "Why do you always have to ruin everything?"

"It's a talent," Tri-Klops replied. "And you're going to hate what I have to say next."

"Ugh. What is it?"

"We've got company," Tri-Klops answered.

Trap Jaw put his feet back down and sat up with a start, gazing out of the large view screen into the starry blackness of space beyond. "I don't see anything," he said.

Tri-Klops tapped his helmet, indicating the device that was wired into his brain, granting him enhanced vision after he'd lost his eyes in battle. "I see things that you don't," he replied. Continuing to stare dead ahead, the man spoke softly, an eerie calmness in his voice. "It's been good working with you, Trap Jaw."

"What in blazes are you talking about?" Trap Jaw asked. Just then, far from the sight of the planet they'd left behind, a Horde starship materialized in front of them, matching their speed in reverse as it faced them head-on. The Horde ship dwarfed their cargo freighter both in size and in armament. Trap Jaw felt his heart skip a beat as he saw death itself looming before them. "Damn." Seconds later, the view screen filled with the bright light of canon fire.

22.

THE BIGGER THEY ARE

Teela was awoken the following morning by her bracer's chime. She had a message. Sitting up, she stretched with a groan. She glanced at her chrono and saw that she'd only managed about an hour of sleep. Contacting the rest of the council on a secure transmission and convincing them of the need for what they were about to do had lasted well into the night, not to mention that she had her own worries gnawing at her. Here she was, still in the palace, while her son was in some type of magic-induced sleep back in Castle Grayskull. Keldor, years after being restored to his true self was now suddenly Skeletor again, with whatever consequences that would involve. Certainly not the least of her worries was the fact that her husband and sister-in-law were still missing, gone on some secret mission for the Goddess. Veena had said that they would return in time, but the Eternian Queen was losing her faith in that promise. It was time now, and they weren't here.

Still dressed in her armor from the night before, Teela rubbed her eyes and rose from her bed wearily. Pressing the blinking button on her bracer, it projected a pre-recorded holo of her father. He looked even more tired than she was. "The emitter is ready," he said. "Meet us in the council chamber when you can." The

queen wore her hair long rather than taking the time to put it up. The message had come nearly an hour before, just after she'd fallen asleep. She didn't want to make them wait further.

Teela still had at least a glimmer of hope that her husband and his sister would return before the tide had turned against them, but the time for waiting was over. The war would begin today. She took comfort in the fact that it would at least begin on her terms. When she reached the council chamber, Teela entered to find it full of old friends. Around them, mounted on the walls, were a series of torches, lit in preparation of the magnetic pulse that would soon make their electronic lighting useless. Everyone was there, from her father and Randor to Mekaneck and newer Masters like Sunturion and Roboto. There were also familiar faces that she hadn't seen in far too long like Ram Man, Man-E-Faces and Buzz Off. She also couldn't help but notice all of the new faces that greeted her, many of whom were friends of Adora's from Etheria; members of the Great Rebellion. She spoke with them briefly, thanking them for their aid, before making her way to her father, who stood near the device itself, along with Gwildor and Scrollos. The device was a rather inconspicuous thing really, looking more like some type of computer, oddly sitting as the centerpiece to the council's table. "Are you ready for this?" her father asked.

"I am," she said, "but I do have one question for Gwildor before we proceed that I regret not having asked earlier."

"What is it, My Queen?" Gwildor asked.

She looked to the Etherians that stood with them before returning her gaze to the Thenurian inventor. "I promised these people when they arrived on our world that I would help them return home if they so wished, when the war was over. Will this pulse effect your Cosmic Key?"

Gwildor smiled, seemingly warmed by her commitment to her earlier promise. "It runs on neutrinos, so the pulse should have little affect on it. Besides, it has a little magic of its own. It will be fine."

"Good," she replied. "I'm a woman of my word, and I want to know that these kind people can return home safely, should we be victorious."

"They can and we will be," Gwildor replied. "You just have to have faith in yourself and in these people. Each of us wants to be rid of Hordak in our own way. Each of us wants peace."

"To peace, then?" she asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"To peace!" the people of the room shouted.

"Hopefully this will be the first step toward just that," she said. "A lasting peace."

As she spoke, Scrollos approached and Teela wondered what the historian had to add, but instead of speaking to the room, he addressed her alone. "My Queen, I humbly ask that I be allowed to fight for you."

"Can you do that?" she asked. "I thought that Veena's spell prohibited you from getting involved directly?"

"I implored the Goddess to free me from my previous duties just last night and she has answered my prayer," he said. "I am free to help."

"Then I thank you for your service, Scrollos," Teela replied.

"Continued service," he clarified. "As a founding member of the Order of Zoar, I have long been in service to the Grayskull bloodline." Pulling back his hood, the mysterious man revealed a bald head and a thick white beard. "I served King Grayskull as Eldor then, and I am proud to serve his family now, as I will until the end of my days."

Amazed at his revelation, Teela was at a loss for words. An original member of the Eternian Council, Eldor was a historical figure revered almost as much as Grayskull himself. "Your aid is most welcome, Eldor," she managed.

Duncan took the brief lull as an opportunity to ask his daughter, "is it time?"

She nodded. "Yes," she said. "Do it."

At his daughter's command, Duncan fired up the machine. Within seconds, the electronics all around them shut down, the flickering of the torches their only source of light this deep in the palace. "Now, let's make our way to the towers," she said. "The Horde will be here soon whether they are ready or not, and I hope they aren't." Outside the palace, in the light of the morning sun, each of the warriors mounted the horses that had been prepared for them and made their way. Teela and the others observed the sky above them growing dark with the number of Horde ships that had been forcibly uncloaked by the magnetic pulse. It was only a matter of time before they reached the surface. Hopefully they'd reach it in flames.

• • •

Draco hugged the walls of his careening ship while making his way to the bridge as fast as he could manage. Forcing open the door, he entered to find chaos had erupted within, techs and crew alike trying to bring the power back online. “What in the blazes was that?!” he roared.

“A powerful electromagnetic pulse, Lord Draco,” the captain replied in a panic, holding onto the back of his chair for dear life. “It’s taken out all power and not just ours, but the entire fleet. We’re entering Alpha Prime’s atmosphere in freefall. We’re going to crash.”

“How did they know we were here?” he demanded.

“I mean no offense, My Lord, but does that really matter now? All we can do is brace for impact.”

Draco drew his sword and rushed the man, running him through from behind, almost stumbling to the floor as the ship tilted to the side. “Insolent fool!” he shouted. Then, as he saw the flames caused by entering the planet’s atmosphere flaring around the viewport, he found himself smiling. It appeared that he had his war early after all. Through gritted teeth, he whispered, “Finally.”

• • •

Hordak found his meditation interrupted by the peculiar sound of the ship losing its power. He swore under his breath as he stood, mouthing an incantation that illuminated his chambers. He’d almost had them; the Sorceress and that boy she’d had with her. For reasons he didn’t understand, he was unable to sense the woman’s presence, but he’d pinned down the boy’s location: Castle Grayskull. When the time was right, he’d tie up that loose end for good, but first he needed to know what was happening. Before he could exit the room, Shadow Weaver appeared before him in a wisp of smoke. “What’s going on?” he asked her.

“We’re under attack,” she hissed. “Somehow, the Eternians and their allies discovered that we were here. They unleashed some type of energy that wiped out the fleet’s power. Each ship is in freefall, heading to the surface as we speak.”

Hordak roared angrily. It wasn’t yet time. In engaging them now, he ran the risk of his plan failing, but this affront couldn’t go unpunished. “Brace yourself,” he said simply. Encircling himself with a shield of magical energy, he fumed. Fine. If the miserable people of this planet wanted to fight this war now, then a war he would

give them. A war to end all wars. A war where, when the dust settled, he would be the new god and even that very dust would belong to him.

A horrible wrenching sound tore through the ship as it impacted the planet's surface, followed by a long grinding groan as it slid across it. Hordak and Shadow Weaver, protected by their magic, remained unharmed. After a long moment, the ship slowed its uncontrolled slide and stopped. Lashing out with rage, Hordak unleashed a spell that blasted through his chambers and the shell of the ship itself to the open air outside. Levitating through the opening he'd created, the Horde leader emerged to find that the surface of the planet had become a graveyard of Horde ships, many of which were engulfed in flames. Upon exiting his own, he sank to the ground, suddenly weakened. Anger again welled up inside of him as he realized that he'd already lost a great number of his forces to this attack, thereby draining a good chunk of his own power in the process. He couldn't let his army know that, so he masked the effort it took as he stood firm and strong once more in the midst of the others: mighty warriors such as Modulok, Octavia and Grizzlor, who emerged from the less damaged ships, joining him at his side along with Shadow Weaver.

In the distance, Hordak caught sight of Draco crawling out from the wreckage, a bloody mess, and he wondered how many of his other generals survived. Mantenna was nowhere to be found, nor was Mosquitor. No matter, their numbers would still be enough to slaughter each and every one of those pitiful creatures who had dared attack him. This was to be his victory, his triumph, and he wasn't about to let an inconvenience like this stand in his way.

* * *

Teela raced atop her golden unicorn steed, Charger, along with the unified Eternian army and the Masters themselves, all on horseback. Teela's group were to meet a large contingent of the allied armies, who should already be at Zoar Tower. The remainder were headed toward Viper Tower. Meanwhile, Eldor had vowed to protect Eternos Palace and the citizens of the kingdom. Having heard many stories of the wizard, she had faith that the people would be safe. In the meantime, as they made their way to their tower, each member of her group looked on in awe as the Horde fleet crashed to the surface all around them like blazing metallic meteorites. It was likely that the pulse emitter had done more than just take away The Horde's air superiority. Just as Teela had hoped, the violent crashes that were ensuing were likely taking a toll on The Horde's numbers as well. She just

hoped that they weren't causing too much damage to the planet itself. Regardless, they'd had little choice, but the queen refused to celebrate. Even at partial strength, Hordak and his forces were more than enough for most armies. Thankfully, Teela and her allies had their entire planet fighting in unison. It was possible that there were crashes like this one happening all over the planet at this very moment, although surely the majority of the Horde ships would end up near the towers, where Hordak needed the most strength. She took at least some satisfaction in the fact that their plan had worked and it was purely because its boldness had surprised Hordak. Unlike The Horde, the armies of Tellus were prepared, united as never before.

Althought there may be other battles happening, Teela knew that this was the one that mattered: the fight to protect the Three Towers. Even now, she could see that they were close to merging. It could happen within a day, or even just a matter of hours, but there was one thing for certain: she and her warriors would be at the towers waiting when Hordak came for them and, if necessary, they would die to stop him from using them in his mad plan.

* * *

Veena stood upon Castle Grayskull's parapet and watched the Horde ships crashing all around her with a smile. Mortals rarely surprised her, but the Eternians' ingenuity and commitment in this moment had impressed her. They'd sacrificed their own advanced technology in an effort to cripple Hordak's fleet and their gamble appeared to have paid off. Hordak would of course be furious and it was that thought that brought a smile to the Goddess's lips. Hordak's hubris would be his downfall. He had no idea what the people of this world were truly capable of. Turning, she headed back down into the castle. The battle had just begun, but she needed to prepare for its end.

Beside her, within the Everdream, Dare and his grandmother looked out at the destruction that was raining down on their world. Dare had never seen anything like it before and, even in his warrior form, he couldn't help but be afraid. Sensing this, his grandmother put her hand on his arm and gently squeezed it. Dare turned and saw Veena exit, making her way back down the steps. "Where is she going?" he asked. "What is she going to do?"

"You'll see," the Sorceress answered, "when the time is right. For now, we need to make our own way to Zalesia. The time is coming for us to play our part, my dear."

• • •

Skeletor and Evelyn ran amidst the chaos of the Horde ships crashing down upon their ancient city. Horrific cries could be heard throughout the city between explosive impacts. "Evacuate to the Central Tower!" Skeletor bellowed, but his voice was largely drowned out by the cacophony of destruction that surrounded them. One after another, incoming Horde spacecraft violently slammed into the buildings all around the Temple of Zalesia, it alone protected by an eons-old spell. Another explosion to their right threw the two of them dozens of feet, slamming into the building across the street. Protected by their new armors, the royal couple scrambled to their feet and pressed on, making their way to the Central Tower on foot, soon finding themselves within the treacherous Sands of Time. To their rear, Zalesia burned, the remains of the Zalesian army rushing to meet them. Skeletor cursed Hordak for destroying his city, no matter how unintentional it may have been. He merely hoped that the intergalactic despot was losing as many people as they were.

Skeletor knew that his actions were unknown to Hordak. He'd been told as much by the Goddess herself. He only wished that it would be enough to turn the tide. As his kingdom died behind him, he felt despair for the first time. He loathed to admit it, but without Adam and Adora, both somehow powered by Grayskull once more, this battle may be nothing more than a futile gesture; one last gasp for air before all of reality drowned in Hordak's ultimate folly. Skeletor had power now, more than ever before, but it hadn't been enough to save Zalesia. That madman had once nearly split this very planet in half. What kind of power stops something like that? Now, if Hordak succeeded in his spell, that mistake of the past would be but a minor gaff in comparison to the damage he would cause here. Skeletor shook all thoughts of doubt from his mind. He needed to focus on the task at hand. The war was now upon them. Before long, the towers would be united for perhaps the first time in all of history and these very sands were destined be the location of the climactic battle for their power. Here is where, no matter the victor, this age was destined meet its end, making way for whatever came next, even if it's nothing at all.

23.

GLORY

Teela and Mekaneck reached Zoar Tower with their contingent of the united armies to find it already under siege. Their allies, comprised of Chief Carnivus and his Quadian army, along with the Aquarians, who were eager to get revenge for their fallen king, were already battling fiercely with an army of Horde Troopers. The Horde was on foot due to the destruction of their more advanced weaponry and vehicles, firing on both the army and the tower as Teela and her allies rode their steeds with abandon to meet them. To the queen's relief, the tower appeared to be protected by some sort of magical energy field, more than likely the work of Zoar herself. As they crested the final grassy hill, the Horde Troopers took notice of their arrival. "Attack!" she commanded with a yell. The army behind her began firing with their plasma-based weaponry at the gray-armored troops, who returned in kind. Now having many more enemies to contend with, the Horde Troopers ceased their fruitless attack on the tower's magic force field to engage them.

The initial volley knocked many of Teela's army from atop their horses, leaving both man and beast to crash to the ground below. Her steed Charger escaped the barrage however and stormed toward their adversaries with a determination of his own. Drawing her sword into her right hand and her plasma

pistol into her left, the queen leapt from atop Charger and swung her sword down with a warrior's fury at one of the outlying troopers who had been advancing toward them. Teela cursed as she saw her sword merely glance off of the thick armor upon impact, with nothing but a few sparks to show for it. She ducked into a roll to her right as the Horde Trooper turned his weapon toward her in response. Before he could fire, she managed to get off a shot of her own which, while it didn't kill the invader, did appear to melt and weaken his armor. The trooper shook off the attack with only a slight stagger and again aimed his weapon toward her. In the blink of an eye, the warrior queen thrust her sword into the weakened hole in the trooper's armor plating and, once past it, into his chest. Her adversary dropped with a clang sound and moved no more. "Great," she muttered. "One down. Ten thousand or so more to go."

Rushing to her side, Mekaneck shouted, "Duck!" She dropped as he used his mace to shield her from the blast of another nearby trooper before swinging his weapon back at the attacker. Mekaneck saw his own attack have a negligible effect on the armored invader, who continued marching forward, firing his blaster repeatedly and with precision. Her old friend expertly blocked each shot with his weapon before gritting his teeth in preparation for his next move. "This is probably going to hurt," he said. He then dropped to one knee and, aiming the top of his pointed helmet at the trooper, forcefully extended his nanite-enhanced neck, powerfully headbutting the armored attacker back several yards into his fellow troops. He picked up the trooper's blaster and began firing into the invading army. "Yup. It hurt."

"We never said this would be easy," Teela said as she regained her footing.

"I didn't expect it to be," he replied, "but I didn't expect their armor to be so formidable, either. They've apparently made some upgrades since Adam and his father last tangled with them back on Etheria."

"Lucky us," she said, joining him at his side and firing away with her pistol. Seconds later, the rest of their army caught up and rushed past them on their way to defend the tower which Teela noticed was indeed on the move, sliding across the ground magically on its way to join its sister structures. It was moving faster than she expected, but thankfully slow enough that their contingent of the army should be able to keep pace with it on its way there, provided they didn't allow The Horde to slow them down too much.

From her left, Chief Carnivus jogged toward them and nodded a quick greeting. "Nice of you to join us!" he shouted in his rumbling voice. "We saved some for you!"

She shot the cat-like humanoid a grin. "We're not greedy!" she replied. Pointing out the tower's actions, she and Mekaneck began to run in an effort to join in the battle that had already moved ahead of them. "We need to keep moving!" she yelled.

* * *

"I'm getting too old for this," Randor grunted. Cringer, who lightly jogged next to the former king, made a mewing sound in agreement. Randor was surprised that the aging green tiger had come at all. No longer Battle Cat, Cringer wasn't really known for his bravery, but he'd insisting on coming along, not leaving Randor's side since they'd left Eternia. When Adam and Adora returned, an event that, as their father, Randor could simply not allow himself to doubt, he knew his son would be happy to see his old feline friend. Until then, they'd just have to keep fighting and surviving. Randor and his group, comprised of Eternians, Etherian rebels, and the Stratos-led Avionians, had reached Viper Tower with surprisingly little incident. A crashed Horde ship here or there with a handful of survivors, but nothing they couldn't handle. None of those they'd encountered had been troopers. Apparently, the ships that had been orbiting near here were carrying the brains of The Horde, rather than the brawn. Many of them appeared to be scientists, but all of them had been armed and had not hesitated to fire at Randor and the rest of them as soon as they'd appeared. Regardless, maintaining pace with the moving tower, just waiting for the real threat to show up wasn't something the former king would describe as an enjoyable time. The tower moving on its own was disconcerting in and of itself, not even considering the fact that an army of troopers was likely going to intercept them at any moment.

"Old?" Duncan replied. "You and me both. I think when this war is over, and we've won of course," he paused to take a breath, "well, I think I may finally retire."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," Randor said.

"You still may not," Glimmer said dourly, jogging beside them with Bow and Castaspella, the army behind them. "This war isn't over yet."

Duncan winced slightly out of embarrassment. The girl had just lost her mother only days prior, and had had precious little time to mourn. She probably felt that he was making light of things. He wasn't. "Glimmer, when you become an old warrior like me, you'll find that a little humor helps one get through trying times," he replied. "Sometimes, it's all that we have."

"I don't plan to become an old warrior at all," she said. "I hope only to achieve victory and return to a peaceful home where bloodshed is but a distant memory and there is no longer any need for warriors."

"As do most fighters, in their hearts," Duncan replied. "Most aren't that lucky. I hope that you are. You've lived through enough war already."

"All my life," she replied, "but it's never hurt as much as it does now."

Duncan placed his hand on her shoulder affectionately as they moved. "I know," he said. "I've lost those close to me as well. Too many. In many ways, I still carry the burden of their ghosts."

Bow pointed toward the horizon. "I'm sorry to cut you all short, but it appears that the company we've been expecting has arrived." At the horizon line, a phalanx of Horde Trooper appeared, marching directly toward them on foot.

"I don't suppose this tower could move any faster?" Sea Hawk asked. "It'd be nice to have all of our forces together rather than scattered about, especially with that many Horde Troopers bearing down on us."

"Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves," Randor offered. "When the fighting starts, it may be all we can do to keep up with Viper Tower. And even then, no one knows what will happen when all three towers converge. It may not be a boon to us at all. Let's take every opportunity to thin Hordak's herd that we can before that fateful event." He didn't want to admit that he was having trouble keeping up with the tower as it was.

Bow nodded in agreement before removing an arrow from his quiver and setting it, aiming at the army of invaders in the distance. "Speaking of." He released the arrow high into the air. It almost seemed to hang there for a moment before it began sailing down to strike one of the troopers right in the eye lens of his helmet, sending him to the ground in a heap. "That's the weakest spot on their armor," the archer instructed. "Aim there. Your plasma rifles will work best." Breaking through the frontlines of the Horde army, a great beast began to emerge, walking upright as a man. It was covered in a thick fur and its twitching, four-fingered hands showed off massive claws that glinted in the sunlight.

"Grizzlor," Sea Hawk said. "One of Hordak's generals. As if we didn't have enough to deal with. Watch out for him. He's not as stupid as he looks."

Randor nodded as the Horde began rushing toward them. "They're coming!" he shouted to the army behind them. "Be ready!" Within moments, the Horde's

forces had crossed the distance between them and both armies collided in the chaotic fury of steel and plasma blasts.

• • •

At the gates of the capital city, Eldor stood fast, armed only with his magic. Before him was a contingent of the Horde army, marching toward him, ready to destroy the city purely for the sake of Hordak's ego. The Masters had gone on to fight at the towers, leaving the protection of the people here to Eldor alone and he was more than ready. He'd been unable to act before, but now, free from the spell of Scrollos placed upon him by Zoar, the ancient wizard relished the opportunity to confront this evil. A thousand years before, Hordak had killed his master and friend. King Grayskull may have died before Eldor's eyes, but the man's bloodline lived on. Eldor and others like him had seen to that. He knew the line's history, its power, and the promise of its future, and he wouldn't allow it to end here. He swore it to Zoar, Serpos and Havok alike.

Emerging from the sea of Horde Troopers, the creature called Modulok shambled toward him on six legs. Insect-like, the twin-headed Horde member had the ability to reconfigure his limbs at will, creating dangerous combinations. He was feared across the galaxies and Eldor was well-aware of the creature's reputation from his studies. "Is this all you have, Hordak?" Eldor asked aloud. Moving his hands in an elaborate practiced motion, they began to glow brightly with power. "If it is, then it isn't nearly enough." He thrust his hands forward and a large blast of powerful magic sent a quarter of the troops careening through the air in all directions. When the dust cleared, Modulok stood tall, only mildly affected by the blast, his two heads smiling in unison. "Well, that one might be trouble," Eldor grumbled.

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"For Zalesia!" Skeletor shouted as his sword Soulslayer connected with a Horde Trooper, cleaving the invader in half at the waist. His magical weapon, a gift from the Goddess Zoar herself, was more than enough for the advanced mechanical armor of the Horde army, who had emerged from their disabled ships in a murderous rage. He was thankful that the sword had the effect it did, for his

remaining forces were dangerously outnumbered. While he was sure that there were many Horde ships around the globe, Zalesia, where all Three Towers were soon to be located, appeared to be where the majority of the Horde fleet had been waiting in orbit. The ships had fallen like meteors, many of them striking the ancient city itself. Zalesia, once again, had fallen. In many ways, when it came to protecting his people, Skeletor had already failed. There was no telling how many Zalesians were dead as history repeated itself upon these immortal sands. The city could be rebuilt; he'd done it before; but the people were gone. Even he could not bring them back. His cry was not one of rallying, but of vengeance. Revenge for the ancient city of Zalesia being murdered a second time. Anger fueled him and his strikes, cleaving every Horde Trooper that dared come within reach of his blade. The armor of Standor protected him while theirs tore like parchment before his enchanted blade.

Nearby, he saw Evelyn, ever graceful, eviscerate two dozen troopers with her magical staff. Her armor, that of an ancient Havokian priestess, kept her safe from her enemies' blows. Even while dealing out such death, he found her to be captivatingly beautiful. Now, due to her spell, they were forever linked, not just in their devotion to each other, but by their very life force. In that brief moment, her eyes locked with his empty sockets and he knew that they would be together forever. When there was nothing left here but blood and sand, the two of them would still stand as one, united in a way that he would never fully comprehend, for such things were beyond his ability. He just knew it to be true.

"Hello, brother." Upon hearing Draco's voice, Skeletor whirled to face the man who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Draco's hair was disheveled, and his face had been bloodied. His black and red armor was dented and scorched from flame. It appeared as if the Horde emissary had barely survived his ship's crash. The thought pleased him. "I told you," Skeletor began, "we are not brothers. You are nothing to me."

"After all we've shared?" Draco said with a laugh. "After your mother raised us both?"

"My mother was dead to me long before she ever encountered you, Draco," Skeletor replied. "Her ghost no longer has any hold on me."

"Perhaps not, but another does," Draco challenged.

"I'm now safe from him as well," he countered.

"Are you?" Draco asked. "Your obvious refusal of my invitation to come home caused me to doubt your sanity, but I see now that you are in fact simply naive. I'm not sure if that's better or worse. If you fight merely for glory, then I feel obliged to tell you that glory means nothing when you're dead."

"Enough talk!" Skeletor shouted.

"Yes," Draco agreed, drawing his own sword and lunging forward. The Horde member's weapon glowed with its own enchantment. Not knowing what that enchantment was, Skeletor realized that the armor of Standor may not be enough to protect him. The skull-faced sorcerer deftly blocked his attacker's strike, stepping to his right so that Draco's blade struck only empty air. The miss caused the emissary to stumble briefly before he steadied himself. Draco was obviously weakened by the crashing of his ship and Skeletor planned to take every advantage of that fact.

Skeletor knocked away a second strike with his sword before using his left hand to send Draco flying back with a forceful spell. "I don't care how many days you've lived and breathed, Draco. This will be your last."

The emissary lay on his back and groaned before forcing himself up to his feet. "Perhaps you're right, but before it's over, I will have my victory. I promise you that."

They locked blades and Skeletor's eyes blazed with red fire. "We'll see." Stepping back, the sorcerer turned and kicked outward, striking Draco hard in the midsection. Once again, the Horde member landed on his back. This time, however, Skeletor leapt atop him before he could stand and plunged his sword deep into Draco's stomach. Withdrawing it, Skeletor stepped back as red blood poured forth from his enemy's wound and soaked into the surrounding sand. "Looks like I win." Skeletor raised his sword for the killing blow, but Draco rolled to the side as he swung down only to have the weapon strike the ground. Scrambling to his feet with a sudden surge of adrenaline, Draco pulled out his Cosmic Key and pressed the keys frantically, opening a portal that he stumbled into, only to have it close behind him mere seconds before Skeletor could follow. With an angry growl at Draco's cowardly actions, the king of the now twice-fallen Zalesia once again turned his attention to the Horde army that surrounded them, letting his rage power him.

24.

TOGETHER AT LAST

Randor and Duncan fought back-to-back against the Horde Troopers that had engulfed them and their allies some time before. They'd already suffered several casualties, but at his last count, the core of the rebellion remained alive, along with Stratos, the two of them and a still-sizeable portion of the unified army. They were doing better than he'd expected. Viper Tower, the mysterious object they were sworn to protect, continued to glide across the surface on its way to meet the other two towers in the Sands of Time. It was all they could manage just to keep up with it while in the midst of battle. Fortunately for them, it was also in The Horde's best interest to keep pace with the tower, and the invading army wasn't putting forth any effort to separate them from it. That didn't lessen the Horde Troopers' resolve in destroying Randor and his allies, however. The Horde still fought with all the ferocity that he remembered from his first encounter with them, back when Hordak had abducted his daughter Adora when she'd been an infant. Viper Tower itself appeared to be protected by a powerful spell and all the Horde army's efforts to breach its entrance had so far been fruitless. Randor thanked the gods for small favors.

As Bow had suggested, they'd indeed found that their plasma-based blasters were at least somewhat effective against the trooper's armor. Any electronic weapons such as lasers or vehicles had been rendered useless by the pulse that had started the attack. Thankfully, The Horde was in the same situation, relying on plasma and edged weapons only, their war machines no longer of any use to them. Catching a free moment, Randor stole a glance at his oldest friend and ally. Duncan was faring well, but he could see the strain on the Man-At-Arm's face as he fought. Randor knew that feeling well. It was the same strain of age that he was experiencing. If they survived this battle, he didn't anticipate either one of them taking up arms again. Their fighting days would soon be over and perhaps that would be for the best. A continued peace, a permanent peace, was a dream that he hoped they would all soon find themselves living in. The peace of the last half-dozen or so years after the formation of the Council of Kings had been welcome, but tenuous at best. The silver lining of this invasion was that he hoped it would unite the world in a way such as it never had been before. Perhaps they would finally be one. Lost in thought, he only barely ducked a plasma blast from a nearby Horde Trooper, feeling it singe his long hair as it passed by. "First things first," he said aloud while silently cursing himself for becoming distracted.

"What?!" Duncan shouted over the noise.

"Nothing!" Randor replied. "Just keep fighting!"

A mighty roar rose above all other sounds of battle. Randor spun around to catch sight of the source: Grizzlor. The hulking beast held the broken body of Castaspella firmly in his grasp before callously tossing her aside. "No!" Glimmer yelled, using her powers of light to attack the creature. Grizzlor roared once more as his sensitive eyes were temporarily blinded. In that moment, Bow loosed an arrow that stuck deep into the Horde general's side. The massive creature swiped with a clawed hand and broke the arrow in half, leaving a portion inside of itself, before rushing the archer and his friend. Duncan and Randor sprinted to help their rebel allies, blasters firing wildly.

Duncan leapt at the Horde general and swung his heavy mace with precision, striking the beast in the temple. Grizzlor dropped to his knees and bared his fangs, blood flowing from the wound. "Do it," he said, his voice a guttural growl. It was then that Duncan remembered how Adora spoke of this creature. That this general of The Horde was as much of a slave as she'd once been, his life nothing but misery and pain. Aiming his plasma pistol at the creature's head, Duncan gave it a nod of understanding as he pulled the trigger. Grizzlor's body toppled to the side as Bow rushed to meet the Eternian Man-At-Arms.

"But why?" Bow asked breathlessly. "Why would he give up like that?"

Duncan stared at the body, unable to look away as he spoke. "Because he wanted peace, just as we do. He just wanted a different kind. He'd come close to receiving it years ago at Adora's hands, and that taste must not have been enough for him."

A shadow came over the group and their eyes raised to see Shadow Weaver swiftly gliding toward them from above, a menacing presence that stopped the lot of them in their tracks. "It's a shame Castaspella died before I could arrive. I owed it to my old friend to be the one to take her miserable life."

"If it were not for her, you would have been dead years ago," Randor challenged, "when she'd had the opportunity to destroy you herself and didn't take it."

"A weakness I'm sure she'd regret now, considering how things have ended," Shadow Weaver replied sardonically. "Viper Tower has almost completed its journey. The Sands of Time are close now. This battle is nearing its end, as are all of you." With those words, the red witch raised her hands, sending powerful magical lightning crackling towards them.

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Back at the city gate, Eldor grimaced as he dodged Modulok's blows with only moderate success. The Horde Troopers he'd arrived with had been easily dealt with, having been no match for a wizard of his caliber, but the Horde general was proving to be a much more difficult adversary to stop than he had expected. Eldor knew of the Horde member's reputation as a fighter, and concluded that he himself had grown cocky over his many years on this sacred planet. He would still age incredibly slowly due to an old spell of his own, but he no longer had the Goddess's spell of Scrollos to keep him safe. As Scrollos, he'd been protected, but now he was vulnerable. He hadn't forgotten what it was like to fight, but he had forgotten what it was like to be hurt. Eldor clutched his side in pain as Modulok scrambled away from him, the insectoid alien rearranging his limbs as he readied for another attack. Still, being free of the spell is what Eldor had asked for. He'd spent enough years on the sidelines. Now, it was once more time to fight.

His hands glowing with power once again, Eldor used his right to quickly heal a broken rib he'd sustained in his last exchange with Modulok. He simultaneously

thrust his left hand toward the creature, unleashing powerful white lighting at the Horde member. It was largely absorbed by Modulok's chitinous exoskeleton, as Eldor's initial blast had been, but the creature was beginning to slow. Eldor was confidant that it was only a matter of time before the Horde general went down.

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"We're almost there," Teela 'Na, the Sorceress of Grayskull shouted. Dare followed her as closely as possible as they ran through the Everdream. He wasn't tired. One didn't get tired in the Everdream, at least that he'd noticed, but he felt another kind of exhaustion that, if asked, he would find hard to explain. It was an exhaustion of the soul, knowing that he was about to engage in battle for the first time, and that he felt wholly unprepared. He and his grandmother were now away from Castle Grayskull, running along the sands of the real world, just a shade off dimension-wise, from what he understood. Ahead of them stood the Central Tower, soon to be joined by its sisters. All around them, the battle for the planet raged, yet the two of them passed through the chaos like ghosts, with none of the warriors on either side taking notice of their presence. None of the live ones at least. On more than one occasion, Dare had seen an Eternian fall, only to have their spirit lock eyes with him as they themselves became a part of the Everdream, though they soon faded from his sight. "Do not fear for them," the Sorceress told him, apparently cognizant of his thoughts, "for their battle is now over. Ours is still to come."

Dare felt his muscles tense, if that were truly possible in this shadow-like world, anticipating what was ahead, and feeling the horror of not actually knowing. While making their way, Dare had noticed something eerie about the Horde soldiers: each and every one of them had the same smoky black tendrils coming out of their foreheads that he'd seen in their vision of Hordak's past; each writhing line a link that connected them to their master, giving him control over them, mind, body and soul. Each tendril appeared to be headed in the same direction. What horrified the young prince most of all was that it was the direction in which they were running: toward Hordak, the master of evil.

Even in this new, idealized body Dare had dreamt up for himself, he felt weak and small next to the task that lay before him and had to remind himself of Veena's words to him, that he was the next king of Eternia. A king wouldn't be scared. Would he? In his moment of doubt, Dare saw Hordak and he froze, stopping his grandmother in her tracks as well. Levitating above the battle, the Horde leader himself looked on without physically engaging. Thousands of tendrils emerged from

Hordak and into the army that had engulfed the area, lifelines that fed him and gave him his power. Suddenly, Dare understood what he needed to do, why he was here in this dreamlike place where only he could see those connections. Pulling the handle of the sword he'd imagined for himself from its place upon his back, he held it tightly. In the waking world, this weapon was but a dream of his grandfather Duncan; a failed attempt that had never truly worked. But this was not the waking world. Here, he reminded himself, anything was possible. Dare pressed a button on the weapon's hilt, igniting it into a powerful laser sword. He took a moment to look into his grandmother's eyes. She nodded in response. He had found his purpose, and along with that purpose, the courage to do what was required of him.

Dare stepped into the fury of battle and, with quick, precise strokes, began severing Hordak's many connections to his army.

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High above the chaos of the war that raged below him, Hordak's eyes snapped open. He'd been ripped from his battle-meditation the moment he'd felt the lifelines between himself and many of his soldiers disappear. It happened each time one of them fell in battle, but this was different. It wasn't death that had taken them. No, it was something else. Somehow his connection to them had been severed. "The Sorceress and her boy," he said aloud with realization, cursing their timing. He'd hoped to deal with them later, when this was all over and the towers were fully under his control. Before him lay the Central Tower. To both his left and his right, he could see the other two towers, nearly here. The time was close. He didn't have time for their meddling. Against the urge of every cell in his body, he forced himself not to immediately go to Castle Grayskull and kill them. He needed to be here. The towers were moving faster now, faster than the armies protecting them could run. Within minutes, they would be one, and his ultimate victory would be at hand. The Sorceress and that meddling child would have to wait. He had no choice.

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Queen Teela held her side as she ran. Although she'd always kept in top form, this battle and their constant running to keep up with Zoar Tower was taxing

her body in ways it hadn't been in years. The sun had completed its daily journey and night had fallen. The battle still raged on in darkness all around them, but she was determined to protect Zoar Tower from Hordak's forces. Unfortunately for Teela and her allies, the tower they'd sworn to protect had sped up considerably and they could no longer keep up with it. The convergence was happening sooner than they'd expected, sooner than any of them had thought possible the day before. The Central Tower was now just ahead of them and Viper Tower wasn't far beyond that. She swore as the pain in her side forced her to stop and Mekaneck ran up beside her, equally in pain from the hours of running. Their race with Zoar Tower had ended. Not far from where the two of them rested, the Three Towers began to join. Much of the fighting stopped in that briefest of moments, Horde Troopers and soldiers of the unified army all stopping in turn to view what had never before happened in countless eons. The mysterious structures connected at their bases with a resounding thud that shook each warrior to their core. The Three towers were now one.

"Keep fighting, you miserable fools!" a shrill voice screamed. The Eternian queen turned to see a woman in red emerge from the Horde forces. "If you don't, I'll have all your heads!" the woman hissed.

Teela recognized her from her husband's tale of freeing Randor and Skeletor from Etheria. It was Catra, Force Captain of The Horde. Teela held her sword tightly and walked toward her. It was time that the leader of Hordak's army was taken out once and for all. In that moment, a bright light erupted from the center of the battle before quickly fading. Teela didn't know what it meant, but could only assume that it was due to the towers' convergence. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to find out, as Catra saw her advancing and took advantage of her momentary distraction to strike, lashing out with her sword, which Teela barely managed to avoid by diving to her left. She hit the ground in a roll and sprang back up to her feet faster than most warriors half her age would have been able to manage.

"Impressive," Catra said with pursed lips as a heavy rain began to fall all around them, "but fancy moves won't be enough to save you."

Teela smiled. "I'm more than just fancy moves." She swung her sword at Catra and the woman leaned back into a roll of her own before regaining her footing. Both warriors circled each other as the battle began to rage around them once more.

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Draco walked along the battlefield, drawing energy from the fallen who had not yet died. Hordak wouldn't abide his drawing from the lifeforce of his armies, but those who were so near death would hardly be noticed. Unfortunately, because there was so little life to be gained from these fallen warriors, it took some time before he'd absorbed enough of it to properly heal himself from the wounds Skeletor had inflicted upon him. Finally, nearly a hundred fallen soldiers later, he once again stood tall, ready to cement his victory over the skull-faced sorcerer in a way that the insufferable man would never see coming. Keying a sequence into his Cosmic Key, Draco opened a portal and stepped into to it, emerging some ways behind the sorcerer and his queen, who were none the wiser as to his presence.

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Skeletor and Evelyn battled the Horde forces fiercely, even as the Three Towers merged into one before them, the sound of which gave even the sorcerer himself a chill that crept down his spine. Shortly thereafter, a bright light appeared just on the other side of the sand dune where they fought before quickly fading. Within seconds, the sky opened and rain began pouring down in great drops. He called to Evelyn and the two of them scrambled to the top of the dune and looked out toward where the light had come from. Before them, not a hundred yards away, stood Adam and Adora, both miraculously transformed and appearing utterly confused about what was going on around them. Skeletor lowered his jaw in a mock smile and raised his sword to them in greeting. He was pleased to see them. Perhaps they would win this war, after all. His jaw closed as He-Man stared in his direction. Why was he just standing there? Couldn't the dolt see that they were at war? Skeletor tried to call out to his nephew, but a crack of thunder drowned out his voice. "He-Man!" he called again through the sudden storm. "Kill them!" he shouted. "Kill them all!"

He saw He-Man turn to his sister and say something, but Skeletor couldn't hear him. What he did hear was the blood-curdling scream of Evelyn coming from behind him. He whipped around to see his wife looking at him with shocked eyes, a wicked blade emerging from her chest, having been thrust into her from behind. She fell to reveal Draco, healed and ready to battle once more, the heavy rain washing the blood from his enchanted blade in rivulets that dripped to the sands at his feet. The man in black smiled wickedly. "With one stroke, I take not just her life, but yours," the emissary said. "I can see her lifeforce attached to your own,

Brother, keeping you in control of the ghost which infests you. With every gasp for air she makes, her lungs filling with blood, the curse of Karak Nul will gain more control over your mind. You will be Skeletor forevermore, a prisoner in your own body. So, victory is mine, as I promised you it would be."

With a roar, Skeletor rushed his enemy, his weapon Soulslayer at the ready. As soon as he was close enough, he swung down with righteous fury only to have his attack blocked by the Dark One before him. "I'll kill you!" he screamed.

"You tried before, remember?" Draco hissed through their locked blades. "Besides, even if you do kill me, it doesn't matter. The towers have converged. Hordak's victory is at hand and soon all of this will be empty nothingness. My master will resurrect me along with the rest of the universe, only this time in his image, in his glory!"

"You're as insane as he is!" Skeletor howled, separating their blades and swinging his sword once again at the Horde emissary, who again skillfully blocked it. The man had singled Skeletor out to torture for his own reasons and the sorcerer had had more than enough even before Evelyn had fallen. Now, there was nothing that would stop him. He would destroy Draco, and he would do it in the most painful way possible.

"Your bravado comes too late," Draco scoffed. "It's meaningless." He indicated the war that raged around them. "All of this is meaningless now."

"If it's meaningless, then why do you continue to fight?" Skeletor asked, the rain pelting his helmet and magical skull. "Why not just die?"

"Because fighting is what I live for," Draco replied with a smile. "I thrive on death." Spinning his sword in an elaborate flourish, the emissary pressed on, though his blows were expertly deflected by the king of Zalesia. Skeletor ducked another swipe and thrust his left fist forward, crushing Draco's nose. The Horde member stumbled backward, spitting out the blood that ran from his injury. "Not very sporting," he chided.

"Neither is killing someone from behind," Skeletor hissed, "and this isn't a game." A slash of his enchanted blade later, and Draco found his sword arm lying upon the sands. Another lightning-quick flash and the other joined it. "This is me killing you." A fresh thrust into the man in black's stomach. "Piece by piece." Another thrust to the thigh, dropping the emissary to his knees. "And I'll look you in the eyes the entire time. Even healed from our last encounter, you're nothing compared to the likes of me."

"I've already won, Skeletor," Draco said, shaking with both shock and laughter. "Evelyn is dead and now so are you. My death no longer matters."

Skeletor's eyes blazed with red fire. "It matters to me." With that, he swung his sword in a horizontal swipe that separated Draco's head from his neck, it and the man's body toppling to the sand in a pool of black and red. The act felt like a hollow victory to Skeletor for he knew that Draco was right. Even with Draco dead at his feet, he'd still lost. He turned and rushed back to Evelyn, who lay upon the sand gasping for breath. Her own helmet had fallen off, her white hair now wet and plastered to her face.

"My love," she said, her voice weak.

"Shhh," he said, wiping the hair from her eyes. "You must hear what I have to say. I only wish I hadn't taken so long to say it. Forgive me, Evelyn. All of this has been my fault. I was foolish. When we were young, I thought I could defy Hordak, but I was wrong. I thought I could control Grayskull and I was wrong. I thought we would rule Zalesia until the gods took us, and it has fallen once more. Under the threat of Hordak, despite all the power of Tellus, and my queen at my side, I still craved more power. I thought I could control the spirit of Karak Nul, but I was wrong. You saved me once again, as you have so many times. You have always been there for me, despite my arrogance. I was a fool when we met and I remain one now. At each and every turn, I've made the wrong decision. Forgive me. Please. Don't leave me. A life without you is not a life worth living." He stared into her motionless eyes and screamed in agony when he realized that she was already gone.

He-Man and his sister rushed to his side, weapons drawn. "Keldor?" He-Man asked.

"Not for much longer," he said quietly, already feeling the spirit of Karak Nul rising within him, struggling for control. It would be only minutes, and he'd be gone forever.

"For a moment, I thought you were with them," He-Man admitted, a feeling of sorrow filling him as he saw his old enemy cradling the body of the woman he loved. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"You don't understand loss, Adam," Skeletor growled as he gently released Evelyn's body. "You never have. Not like this." Standing, he looked toward Adora. "What do you call yourself in this form?" he asked.

"She-Ra," she replied over the storm, her voice filled with sadness. She and Evelyn had grown close during her time here. More than that, the twins had seen Evelyn as a baby in Viper Tower, vibrant and full of life, just minutes before. Now she was dead, with neither of them able to do anything about it.

"Then She-Ra, I ask two things of you," Skeletor began. "First, you and your brother must finish this. Destroy Hordak once and for all, as the prophecy states."

"But we need you," She-Ra replied. "We need you at our side."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he said. "Evelyn's life force was all that kept me in control of the spirit of Karak Nul, the ghost of Skeletor. With her death, I feel my will giving way already. Which brings us to the second thing I must ask of you, the only thing that can save me, which must be done now, immediately." He turned the handle of Soulslayer toward She-Ra and handed it to her. "This sword is the only thing that can kill the evil spirit within me, and it can only be wielded by one whose soul has also been touched by evil. He-Man would never suffice," he paused, glancing toward his nephew before looking back to her, "but you will."

"I can wield it because of my time as Despara," she said with a nod as she realized what he meant, "but how do I kill this spirit?"

"By running me through with it," he said.

"I can't do that," she protested. Behind her, lightning filled the sky once more, followed closely by a loud crack of thunder.

"You must," he insisted. "I had planned on having Evelyn do it once this was all over, but now—" he trailed off. "You are now the only one who can wield it, the only one I trust to do what must be done and you must do it quickly, before it's too late."

She-Ra held the sword tight in her hand, her eyes visibly wet from tears, even with the rain. "But I love you, Uncle."

"And I you," he admitted, for the first time since he'd met her. "Now do it," he said. "Do it now!" he yelled. Suddenly, before he'd even realized it, it was over, the mystical blade sunk deep into his chest, emerging again at his back. He watched her withdraw it, tears streaming down her face as he fell to the ground. His mouth agape in a scream of silent anger before fading into the void. Keldor reached up slowly with his right hand and felt the flesh of his face once more, wet from the rainfall. She'd done it. She-Ra threw the weapon aside and dropped to her knees beside him. Keldor looked deep into her eyes and smiled, thankful that he would

no longer have to fear becoming Skeletor again. "Thank you, My Dear," he told her. "Don't worry about me. Go, leave me with Evelyn and finish this once and for all."

"I'll be back for you when it's over," she said. "I swear it."

He watched her stand and join her brother, who had aged but still resembled the He-Man that Keldor remembered, albeit now with a kingly beard. Older and more distinguished, the man looked a lot like his father. Keldor had always been rather annoyed by that fact, but now it brought him sadness on top of the loss he already felt. He and Randor had been friends once. But then, he was nothing if not a man full of regrets. However, there was at least one more he could atone for, here and now. "Adam," he said, "I'm sorry. Tell your father I'm sorry, too."

He-Man nodded. "When this is finished, you can tell him yourself."

25.

SHADOWS RETREAT

Eldor struggled with Modulok, the two of them wrestling along the ground. So far, Eldor had kept his promise. Not a single Horde member had breached the gate. Eternia and its citizens remained safe. All that was left was to finish the insectoid creature off once and for all. Separating once again, Modulok stood and bared his teeth before speaking for the first time. “Aren’t you tired, Old Man? Why not just die, already?” He flexed his many arms and his four bulbous eyes flashed with both hatred and annoyance. He couldn’t understand how an elderly man was giving him such trouble.

“My purpose here isn’t finished yet,” Eldor replied. “But yours is.” Modulok leapt toward him and Eldor jumped over his attack, far spryer than he appeared. Deftly landing on the other side, the wizard turned and spoke an ancient incantation. A cyclone of smoke rose from the ground and swept Modulok off of his many feet. Spinning in the air, the creature began to gray and harden before falling back to the grasses below, now nothing more than stone, a twisted horror of a statue. Eldor approached and used a powerful spell to blast the statue into rubble. He wasn’t sure that the spell would work, for Modulok’s chitinous shell had protected him from most of Eldor’s previous attacks, but that hardened exoskeleton had in fact given the

wizard the idea. The shell was strong. He merely had to change that it into something else. Years before, he would have thought of such a thing immediately, but it had been a long time since he'd been in battle. Regardless, the result had been the same. Now, the threat to the city was over, and the fate of the universe was all that was left. Taking a deep breath, Eldor reached out with his magics and smiled as he sensed a familiar presence. The Twins of Power had returned. All was as it should be.

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The twins saw Keldor crawl toward the body of Evelyn and cradle it tightly to his chest as they turned and made their way toward the Central Tower. They had only been back in their home time period for a matter of minutes, and were still trying to process just what was happening. Upon seeing that Keldor had once again become Skeletor, He-Man had thought that he'd betrayed them all, but he'd been wrong. The Eternian king had rushed to Skeletor to face him, only to find a man broken with the loss of his only love. The thought forced Adam to search out Teela on the battlefield, but the night was growing too dark and the storm that raged all around them wasn't making things any easier. He'd simply have to have faith that she still survived and was fighting somewhere here with him. What gave him hope was the thought that, even if he couldn't see her, he was now closer to her than he'd been in days. He and his sister's journey to Preternia had held many revelations about King Grayskull and the formation of his kingdom, not to mention Castle Grayskull itself, but now they were finally back home, and it was time to defend it.

Clutching the Star Sword in his left hand, He-Man ran toward the Three Towers, using his thunderous punches to clear the way through numerous Horde Troopers. His sister, more powerful as She-Ra than ever, raced alongside him, her cape blowing behind her in the winds of the storm. Ahead of them, he could see their goal. Hordak hovered above the chaos, protected by a magical shield. Within the seemingly impenetrable bubble he'd encased himself in, the Horde leader levitated with his arms outstretched. In his left, he held his Cosmic Key, which was already glowing with multicolored lights. In his right, he clutched a large vial of blood; the long-stored blood of Adora that Veena had told them about. Hordak now simultaneously held the power over space and time within the Cosmic Key and with the blood of the Grayskull bloodline, a connection to the gods themselves. Ahead

of him stood the Three Towers, now united. The fiend had everything he needed to cast the spell that would unmake all of reality.

Realizing that they had arrived just in time to stop that pivotal moment from happening, He-Man leaped into the air, reared back with his fist, and unleashed a powerful punch that shattered the mystical field surrounding Hordak upon impact. The spell had been enough to protect Hordak from He-Man's allies, but it was nothing compared to the combined power of Grayskull and Zoar that He-Man himself now embodied. A nearly-deafening crack of thunder followed as Hordak landed on his feet, still clutching the ingredients he so desperately needed. Without missing a beat, She-Ra launched her Sword of Protection into the air toward her adoptive father's right hand, shattering the vial of her blood. "Sword, return!" she yelled and the weapon turned in mid-air, flying back into her grasp. Hordak roared with anger as the blood from the vial washed away in the heavy rains. He turned to face the Twins of Power, foretold by ancient prophecy, his expression one of pure rage. "It's too late now, Hordak," She-Ra said. "It's over."

"Because the vial is broken?" he asked with a snort. "Don't be a fool." Hordak calmly hung his Cosmic Key from his belt before continuing. "I can still get it from the source."

"You'll have to go through me," He-Man said, stepping between them.

"What makes you think I meant her?" Hordak retorted. "Either one of you will do." Forming a wicked-looking sword from thin air, the Horde leader immediately thrust it toward He-Man, intent on delivering a killing blow as quickly as possible.

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Dare continued swinging his laser sword within the Everdream, severing Hordak's many connections to his army. The Horde leader had noticed his efforts by this point and was desperate to complete his spell before he grew too weak, but to Dare's shock and joy, his father and aunt had returned from their mission and were now battling the evil creature in the waking world while he was cutting the magical tendrils in the Everdream. Hordak was doing his best to fight back on both fronts. The tendrils, once benign, were now actively avoiding Dare's strikes and, in some cases, even attacking him. Still, he persevered, protected by his Grandmother and emboldened by the presence of his father and aunt, now

obviously enhanced by the power of Grayskull once more, if not something even more powerful than that.

Dare wasn't sure, but he was beginning to think that the level of concentration involved in Hordak's end of the fight was weakening the creature. The young prince still had many more connections to sever, but he felt safe in the presence of his family, even if most of them didn't even know he was there. Finally, he was fighting alongside his father He-Man, just as he'd always dreamed. The boy continued to fight, hoping for all their sakes that what he was doing would help give them an edge.

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Randor and Duncan shielded themselves as best they could from Shadow Weaver's barrage of mystical lightning. Randor knew that if Castaspella had survived, she probably would have known how to block the red witch's spells, but there were no magic-wielders amongst them now. Glimmer was doing her best, sending bolts of solidified light toward Shadow Weaver, but so far, her attempts had been unsuccessful, and the Horde member continued undeterred. They'd already lost several fighters to the witch's magics, but there appeared to be little they could do. "Randor," he heard a weak voice say from nearby. He quickly turned to see Castaspella crawling toward him on the sands. She wasn't dead, at least not yet. Blood ran from her mouth and she was obviously in great pain. Her time was drawing near. Grizzlor had done the deed, but Castaspella had yet to succumb to her injuries. In her hand, she held a familiar golden knife, a shadow gem embedded in its handle. It was the knife she'd intended to destroy Shadow Weaver with years earlier, during Randor's escape from the Fright Zone. If he remembered correctly, it would take away the woman's power.

"The knife? You retrieved it after Skeletor pulled it from Kira 'Na's body?" he asked.

"Yes. She's... too dangerous," Castaspella said, her voice a wheeze, handing the ceremonial weapon to him. "Should have killed her then," she gasped. "Got sentimental."

"I promise you that I won't make the same mistake," Randor said, holding the weapon tightly in his right hand.

"You'll never get close enough to drive it into her heart, to kill her. Aim for the gem she wears... destroy it and you'll take her power." With a final breath Casta looked through him and to the world beyond.

"Good journey, my friend," Randor said as he gently closed her eyes. He saw Duncan staring intently at them and the former king took the opportunity to show his oldest friend the knife. Casta had been right. He'd never get close enough to drive it in by hand. He'd have to throw it, something he'd been proficient at as a younger man, but that was a lifetime ago. Still, he had no choice. The fiendish woman was sure to see it coming, though. He'd need her to be distracted, and Duncan was already formulating a plan. The Eternian Man-At-Arms adjusted his helmet, gripped his blaster tight and stood.

Before his old friend could draw the woman's attention however, something else seemed to have already. "Despara!" Shadow Weaver hissed. "She's returned." The red witch's arms lowered, no longer spitting out lightning, her eyes closed in concentration as she sensed the presence of her adopted daughter. Randor had to keep his own emotions in check as he realized that Adora had returned, hopefully along with her brother. He needed his mind clear, his thoughts focused on one thing and one thing only: Shadow Weaver's amulet. Feeling his muscle memory take over, Randor lightly gripped the blade of the ceremonial knife in his hand, rearing it back over his right shoulder. In one smooth motion, he launched it toward her. He watched as though he were standing outside of himself, feeling as if time itself were slowing to a crawl as the weapon spun through the air toward its target. With a surprisingly quiet "clink" sound, the knife connected with the gem just right of its center. Cracked in two, it fell from its setting to the sands below. "No!" Shadow Weaver screamed, her eyes snapping open with shock and rage.

Their enemy fell to the ground and Randor saw, if only for a moment, her glowing eyes fade back to their normal human state; still green, but now within the body of a mortal woman, much of her immense power now gone. "No, no, no, no, no," she muttered as she stumbled up to her bare feet, tripping over her long red dress before lifting it up and running away. The soldiers around Randor and Duncan erupted with cheers, but any attempts to stop her were cut short by the rush of another legion of Horde Troopers. It was a good victory, and one to be proud of, but the fight wasn't over yet.

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Not far from where Randor and Duncan were fighting, Teela still stood face to face with Catra, the Force Captain of the Horde army. The two women had proven to be an even match for each other, neither having the upper hand over the other for more than the briefest of moments. Teela knew that battles were often won in those moments. She just had to wait for the right one to present itself. Mekaneck had been swarmed by Horde Troopers toward the beginning of her battle with Catra and Teela wasn't sure what had happened to her friend in the time since. All she knew was that he wouldn't be able to help her, nor her him. "Had enough?" Catra asked her, the Force Captain's voice sounding strained from exertion.

Teela tightened her grip on her sword and smiled. "I'm just getting started." Teela knew that Catra's sword had a mechanism that could change it into a whip, a weapon that the queen was relatively unfamiliar with defending against, outside of Beast Man. For the first time since their massive battle with The Horde had begun, Teela was grateful for the close quarters. It made the battle itself very difficult, but at least it limited Catra to using her sword in a form that Teela was more comfortable defending herself against. Just as she'd completed her thought on the matter, Catra swung the blade at her neck. Teela leaned back and barely avoided the tip of it, which came close enough to nick her, but not enough to draw blood. Another inch or two closer to the woman and Teela would have been done for.

Unexpectedly, Catra followed through with her sword strike by continuing to turn into the swing, bringing her right leg up in a powerful kick that struck Teela in her stomach and knocked her to the ground with enough impact that it forced the air out of her lungs. Gasping, Teela realized that she'd also lost her grip on her sword sometime during the fall. Catra smiled wickedly, the woman in red walking toward her casually amidst the chaos that surrounded them. This was it, Teela thought. This was how it would end. Without warning, Ram Man plowed through a line of Horde Troopers and smashed into Catra, sending her flying. "You alright?" the Master asked, offering Teela his massive hand. She took it and he quickly helped his queen to her feet.

"Yes," she replied, her breath returning. "Thank you, old friend." The gargantuan Eternian merely grinned and resumed attacking the Horde soldiers that surrounded them. Picking up her weapon, Teela turned to see Catra stumbling to her feet. She couldn't help but be impressed. The woman was far tougher than she'd previously given her credit for. Teela had seen giants fall from just one of Ram Man's blows, and yet the Force Captain still stood. Both women reached for their swords and rushed each other, though Catra was on much shakier feet than she was. When the moment was over, they each turned to face the other once more. Catra's blade was clean. Teela's, however, dripped with blood. When Catra saw it, she looked down with a surprised expression to see that she'd been mortally

wounded. The moment Teela had been patiently waiting for had come. With an angry hiss, Catra fell to her knees and dropped her weapon. Teela approached cautiously, not trusting the woman, especially in her present state, for an animal backed into a corner could be more dangerous than any other. Instead of seeing a look of hatred in the woman's eyes, as she'd expected, Teela instead found one of pleading.

"End it," Catra begged her. "You've won. Don't leave me here to suffer. Please." With a solemn nod, Teela granted Catra the mercy she requested even though she knew that, had their positions been reversed, Catra wouldn't have done the same for her.

26.

THE ART OF WAR

He-Man, joined by his sister She-Ra, battled Hordak ferociously but so far, the twins had only managed to battle the Horde leader to a stalemate. The three of them circled each other for what must have been the dozenth time. The siblings, with practice from their time in Preternia, now fought as one, and Hordak was still feeling them out, searching for an advantage that He-Man suspected he wasn't finding. That was good. The sorcerer had fought She-Ra before, but this was his first experience with He-Man and the Eternian king took pride in knowing that he fought quite differently than the daughter Hordak had raised as his own. The creature didn't know what to expect from him. More than that, the time spent fighting alongside his sister had brought them closer than ever before. Despite their current situation, where neither side seemingly had an advantage, He-Man now felt that Hordak's losing their battle was inevitable. If the madman was as intelligent as the legends said, it was likely that he was also beginning to realize that fact. As they stared each other down, Hordak's lips raised in a sickly smile that exposed his razor-sharp teeth. "Isn't it beautiful?" Hordak asked. "All of this death and misery?"

"I find nothing beautiful about war, Hordak," he replied, the look on his sister's face wordlessly warning him to be careful, and he heeded her. Hordak didn't seem

like the talkative type. If he was trying to initiate a conversation, he was certainly stalling or aiming to distract them.

"Despite all of the battles you've engaged in, you still don't understand war," Hordak said. "War is an art, He-Man. Death is my medium, chaos my canvas and this," he spread his arms, indicating the destruction that surrounded them, "this is my masterpiece."

"It's not to my taste," He-Man replied.

Hordak grinned once more, a sickly expression on the pale creature. "Perhaps you prefer a blank canvas? You'll have one once I've wiped all of this away."

"That's not going to happen," He-Man challenged.

"Who's going to stop me?" Hordak asked. "You two? Why? Because of some prophecy?"

"A prophecy you surely believe," She-Ra countered, "or you would be fighting us instead of stalling. You're afraid."

At her words, Hordak's sadistic grin finally faded. "I fear nothing."

"You fear death," She-Ra argued, "or you wouldn't have spent so much time and effort trying to cheat it. You fear He-Man, because you don't know what to expect from him. And you fear me, because with me," she pointed the tip of the Sword of Protection toward him, "you know exactly what I'm capable of."

Hordak said nothing, merely glaring at the woman he'd once called his daughter. The woman who'd betrayed him. The king of Eternia saw the creature's grip tighten on his sword in preparation. "Now!" He-Man yelled.

From behind Hordak, Keldor, still badly wounded from the magical Soulslayer blade, stumbled out of a portal created by Draco's Cosmic Key and swung the weapon at the second key that hung from the Horde Leader's belt, destroying it in a shattering blow. Within seconds, he then destroyed his own. Hordak became livid and turned, using his magic to throw Keldor far from them, smashing the man's body against the stone walls of Viper Tower. He-Man prayed that his uncle would survive. With his actions, Keldor had likely just stopped Hordak's spell once and for all. "It's over now, Hordak," He-Man said. "There's no way to complete your spell. Your armies are falling. Soon, this war will be ours."

"So it is," Hordak replied. "But I still have unfinished business. If I can't have this victory, I will at least have my revenge." With those words, the vile creature

levitated high above the battle and began moving away from them at great speed. He was moving too fast for the twins to catch him. Worse than that, neither of them had any idea where he was headed.

"Adam!" a voice cried. He-Man turned to see his wife running toward him in the falling rain, along with his father Randor, Orius, and Duncan. He met Teela's embrace and kissed her passionately, ecstatic that she and his other closest friends were still alive. There was no telling how many others they'd lost. "Where's Hordak going?" Teela asked, panicked. "What did he say?"

"Something about revenge," he answered.

"The castle!" Teela said with a start. "Castle Grayskull! Our son is there!" she exclaimed. "The goddess said he'd have a role to play in this!"

With her words, He-Man's expression settled into one of steely determination, even more than before. "We'll never get there in time on foot," he said. "Where's the closest vehicle?"

"Nothing works," Mekaneck said. "We used a magnetic pulse to wipe out all of The Horde's technology, but lost ours in the process. It was a gamble we had to take."

"Somehow, we must find a way," He-Man persisted.

"I think I see one!" Randor shouted.

He-Man followed his father's line of sight and saw a very welcome friend: Cringer. The giant cat was running down a sand dune at full speed to meet him. He didn't expect to find his old friend here as Cringer hated battles of any kind, but he knew that the cat's presence was a blessing. There may be hope yet. Cringer shook the rainwater from his fur as best he could before jumping up onto He-Man and licking his face with abandon. Cringer was simultaneously incredibly happy to see him and terrified of the battle that was slowly dying down around them. Placing the cat back on the ground, He-Man looked Cringer in the eyes. "One more time, old friend?" Cringer appeared to think it over for a moment before finally nodding. He'd always been a highly intelligent creature. He knew what he needed to do. He-Man turned to his companions. "You may want to step back," he said. His allies rushed to the side as He-Man aimed the Star Sword at his faithful green tiger. "I just hope this still works. By the power of Grayskull!" he roared.

At that moment, the sword crackled with green flame, lashing out and engulfing his old companion. Cringer's muscles swelled and grew, and the cat himself grew larger by the second until he was more than three times the size he'd

been before. Red armor formed around Cringer and he was Battle Cat once more. He-Man's family and friends cheered as he mounted the mighty cat for the first time in many years. Eternia's champion had finally returned and the importance of that event was not to be understated. He held his hand out for his sister to climb up behind him, the two of them ready not only to protect Dare and Castle Grayskull, but to fulfill the prophecy once and for all.

"Hordak's power is weakening," She-Ra said. "I don't know how, but I can sense it."

"Perhaps it has something to do with Veena," Teela said. "She's at the castle with Dare."

"Good," He-Man replied. "Hopefully she can protect Dare until we get there. In the meantime, continue the fight. End this war. Perhaps as Hordak grows weaker, The Horde does the same. We can only hope."

"Good luck, son," Randor said. "I wish we could all be there with you"

He-Man nodded, rubbing Battle Cat's exposed shoulder. "You will be. No matter how far away I am, all of you are always with me." He gave Battle Cat a slight kick and they were off, faster than any man, even one powered by the gods, could travel on their own. He only hoped that they hadn't already taken too much time with their reunion.

27.

THE NEW MASTERS

"I never knew Cringer could move like this!" She-Ra yelled over the winds that rushed past them as Battle Cat raced toward Castle Grayskull. "Makes me miss my horse! He could fly, you know!" He-Man admired his sister's positivity as always, even in these darkest of moments. All around them lay the bodies of the fallen, both allies and Horde alike, the rain still falling in sheets, violently splattering the already wet ground. Many of the remaining Horde Troopers had surrendered and were being held by allied forces. Something had taken their resolve. Such a thing happening defied every legend about The Horde that He-Man had ever heard. Something strange was definitely happening, but he couldn't allow himself to be distracted by it. He had to get to Grayskull. How many times had he been here before, in this moment, riding atop his old companion, racing toward that ancient Castle? He didn't dare count. This time, however, the stakes had never been higher for him. This time, he was in a race to save his only son, who Hordak has somehow sensed within the castle.

Within minutes, He-Man and She-Ra crossed the desert and the benefit of having solid ground beneath his massive paws only made Battle Cat all the faster. Ahead of them, Castle Grayskull rose up from the horizon. They weren't too late,

after all. There was still hope. Before long, He-Man saw Hordak standing at the castle gate. Battle Cat had brought them here faster than he'd ever known the cat to travel in his life, and He-Man would be eternally grateful for that. As Battle Cat rushed the Horde leader, both He-Man and She-Ra leapt from his saddle, launching themselves toward the sorcerer. Without warning, Hordak turned and blindsided the two warriors with a powerful spell that knocked their weapons from their hands and sent them sprawling, the twins landing harshly on the ground.

"Why here, Hordak?" He-Man asked with a grunt, as he and his sister regained their footing. "In all the time that you could have attacked Grayskull, why now?"

Hordak walked calmly toward them as he spoke, confidant even now. "Because something has been draining my power and I have traced the cause of that disturbance here. Now that I've arrived, I will end it, and with my full power restored, I will destroy this planet once and for all. I almost did it on accident once, an eon ago. I should have just finished the job then."

"Without a Cosmic Key, you have no way of leaving," She-Ra said, still struggling with the enchanted vines. "You'll die too."

"Your key still remains," he replied. "It's ony a matter of time before it's in my hands." He willed a wicked sword into his hand from the air, lunging at the twins as they rolled in opposite directions.

Still weaponless, but far from powerless, He-Man's right fist burst into green flame as he punched the ground between himself and the Horde leader. With a rumbling crack, the ground itself shook, nearly knocking Hordak from his feet. She-Ra flared her Starburst armor's cape open, temporarily blinding the creature with the light of Zoar as He-Man rushed toward him. Hand again ablaze with the power of The Goddess, the Eternian king struck Hordak with a powerful blow to the face. Hordak roared in pain as he spat out a pair of pointed teeth. Despite the pain, he quickly recovered, sending He-Man flying with a blast of magic.

Siezing the brief opportunity, She-Ra leapt toward the creature with a flying kick, connecting with his ribs, which she felt crack beneath his armor. Zoar had given them the power they needed. They just needed to see this through. The Horde leader stumbled backward toward the chasm that surrounded Grayskull, but she matched his pace and soon overtook him, striking him with a powerful punch of her own. Soon after, Battle Cat joined the fray, swiping at Hordak with his massive paws. The cat's claws tore deep welts into and through Hordak's armor, gashing the despot's chest before his enhanced mechanical armor could heal itself.

The blow had nearly sent the hideous creature careening into the abyss, but he quickly levitated and landed on its edge once more. "Enough!" Hordak shouted, unleashing another spell. With little warning, powerful vines sprang from the soil and ensnared both the twins and Battle Cat, slamming them violently to the ground where more would soon appear and wind their way around the heroes, holding them tight. Turning his head and spitting out a gob of blood, Hordak turned back toward the castle.

"The Horde has fallen!" He-Man shouted, straining to break free. "You've already lost!"

Hearing him, Hordak whipped around to face them once more. "What Horde?!" he shouted. "Those soldiers lying dead in the desert? The generals who connive and plot beneath me? You idiot! I am The Horde!" he seethed. "Its power is my own, and when it is restored, I will use it to wipe you all from history! Your family, your friends, and all life on this world will cease to exist. I may no longer be able to literally wipe this wretched place from existence, but when I'm finished, a hundred years from now, no one will know the difference." Facing the castle again, Hordak raised his hands and began an incantation with the intention of forcing Grayskull's bridge to lower. To his surprise, it lowered of its own accord before he could finish the spell.

Standing in the entrance was Veena, her magnificent wings spread wide. "You are not welcome here," she said.

"Who are you?" Hordak asked.

"Your attempts to upset the natural order of things have upset the gods, Hordak," Veena replied. "Namely me, but know that my words carry the weight of my siblings also."

"Zoar," he hissed. The name left his lips like a curse.

"Yes," she replied.

"Then today will be the day that not even a goddess could stop me," he challenged.

"I don't need to," she said, "for I have a score of my priestesses to do it for me." Lowering her wings, both He-Man and She-Ra saw dozens of Sorceresses that had been hidden behind them. Pulled from the full history of the Order of Zoar, each Sorceress had returned for this fateful moment. "Along with one other," Veena continued. Stepping to the front of the throng was Teela's mother, the Sorceress of Grayskull that He-Man was the most familiar with, and owed the most to. With

her stood his son Dare, the boy's tiny hand held tightly within his grandmother's. He-Man felt his smile broaden as he saw Dare, alive and well. "All of your links to the soldiers that once powered you are now severed, Hordak," Veena said, "all thanks to this young boy. Now, I ask you: if even a child can defeat you, why should a goddess bother with you at all?" Feeling no need to address Hordak further, Veena simply turned her back to him and made her way deeper into the castle.

"Don't you dare turn your back on me!" Hordak seethed, a look of anger upon his face that even She-Ra had never witnessed before. Distracted, Hordak's magical vines grew weak and He-Man, along with She-Ra and Battle Cat, broke free of them with little effort. "I was to be the new god!" Hordak roared.

The Sorceress Teela 'Na lifted her grandchild into her arms and shook her head. "That never would have happened," she said. "You may have sought to master the universe, Hordak, but the gods themselves are that universe, and they cannot be mastered, unless they so choose it."

With a howl of rage, Hordak rushed the castle gate, but just as he set foot on the jawbridge, a nearly blinding light emanated from within the doorway as the many Sorceresses of Grayskull folded their forms into a flock of green falcons, their ghostly forms piercing through him as they flew through the open gate, casting the despot out into the grasses beyond it. The gate closed behind them with a resounding thud, symbolically shutting the castle away from Hordak forever. With their light filling the air around them, the rain ceased as the morning sun began to creep over the horizon. The falcons screamed into the suddenly clear sky, heading for what remained of the battle. There, He-Man surmised, they would use their healing magics to nurse the wounded, and for those who had fallen, welcome them to the Everdream, where they would guide them home.

Hordak scrambled to his feet as He-Man and She-Ra looked on, weapons once again firmly in hand. The creature now looked less like an enraged animal than a petrified one. It was truly a startling change. With his ties to innumerable other life forces now severed, every trace of their darkness burned away from his body by the many Sorceresses who'd passed though him, Hordak began to appear thin and sickly; an ancient being no longer protected by dark magic, but nearly crippled by its absense. For the briefest of moments, He-Man found himself pitying the thing, so afraid of death that it had spent eons taking the lives of countless others just to spare its own. When his eyes met his sister's however, and saw the determination within them, his purpose was renewed. There could be no pity for a creature such as this. Only the kind of finality that would spare untold others. It would be the first and only life that He-Man would take. He promised himself that

much, but he knew that he had no choice. Walking alongside his sister, she met his gaze once again. "It has to be done," she said. He merely nodded in answer.

Hordak weakly summoned his magical sword once more, only to watch it crumble to dust and float away in the breeze, the last of his magic now spent. "Don't do this, Despara... Adora," Hordak began, addressing her by her birth name for the first time in a weak and pleading voice. "Surely your mother Shadow Weaver has fallen in this war, along with so many others. Would you kill your father as well?"

"It's a war you started, Hordak, and you were never my father," She-Ra replied, her tone icy, yet still calm and controlled. "You're the monster who stole me from my real father when I was just a babe; who kept me from knowing my family; who made their very existence a secret from me. You, Hordak, are the fiend who ensured that every moment of my life was a lie," she paused, indicating He-Man, "every moment up until I met my real family. And now the life you'd given me before is but the shadow of a memory. That life, and you, are nothing compared to the love that I have for them."

"And they for you," He-Man said.

"And love conquers all," she replied.

With that, the twins thrust their weapons forward in unison, piercing Hordak's armor and sinking deep into his chest. Removing their blades, the weakened Hordak, a mere echo of his former self, fell to his knees in the soft grass, blood rushing forth from his wound, his mystical armor no longer repairing itself. "No," their enemy wheezed, his voice weak. "I can't lose."

"You can, and you have," She-Ra said, "and now the prophecy is finally fulfilled."

Exhaling his final breath, the withered creature toppled over, his cold and empty eyes staring upward toward the heavens. For generations, Hordak had ruled over entire star systems. Now, those systems were free. He-Man looked to his sister and saw a sadness in her eyes despite their victory. Placing a hand upon her shoulder, he took her attention from the body of Hordak at their feet. A sense of quiet filled the night air. "Are you alright?" he asked.

She-Ra nodded. "Yes. It's just hard to believe that it's finally over. So many lives lost and so many worlds forever changed. That it would all come to an end in such a," she paused, searching for the right word, "pitiful way. I'm thankful that it's over, that those worlds will now be safe again, but it feels, I don't know, empty somehow. I don't know a life without war, Adam."

"You'll find your peace, just as the rest of us will, and you'll always have your family to stand by you," he replied. "You'll never be alone."

She reached for the hand on her shoulder and placed her own on it gently. "How are you feeling?"

He-Man wasn't so sure he had an answer to that, but had a good feeling that once he'd rejoined the rest of his family, he'd be just fine. "I'll be alright," he said. He smiled as Battle Cat approached and knocked into them both with a rumbling purr. "Thank you, my friend," he told the giant cat. "Without you, we never would have gotten here in time."

A creaking sound caught their attention as the castle's Jawbridge opened once again. The moment it touched the soft grasses on the other side of the chasm, Dare ran toward him with a victorious whoop, Veena and Teela 'Na at his rear. "Papa!" the boy cried. He-Man scooped his son up into his arms and held him tight.

"Oh, I've missed you!" He-Man said. "I can't wait until we're both back with your mother. But first," he said, trailing off as he saw that Veena and Teela 'Na were approaching.

"Congratulations on your victory, Adam and Adora," Veena said, "and Dare." Upon speaking his son's name, the goddess gave the child a knowing wink, but He-Man could only guess at its meaning. "Now, close your eyes, and I will return us all to the Three Towers. The night is not yet finished." They did so, and a feeling of falling overtook them.

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In the near distance, a hidden figure watched the heroic warriors disappear into thin air. Rising from the tall grasses she'd used to mask her presence, the woman in red stumbled her way to the corpse of Hordak. It was a pitiful sight, her former master no longer resembling the leader she remembered, but then she was different now as well. Very different. It was then that the woman had a remarkable realization. "I'm free," she said aloud, removing her hood and face covering, her raven hair dripping wet from the storm that had just ended. Reaching up with newly youthful hands, she felt her true face for the first time in decades; since the day Hordak had come to her, offering her a deal that had changed her life forever. "Free," she repeated. With those words, Light Spinner turned and fled, never looking back.

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When He-Man, She-Ra, and Dare reopened their eyes, they found themselves standing amongst their friends along with the members of the Great Rebellion. The battle was over, the Horde members that hadn't fallen in battle having either fled or been captured. With no working spacecraft, the ones who escaped wouldn't be able to hide forever. Seeing them appear, Teela rushed toward the twins and Dare and embraced them before kissing her son on the forehead. "Dare! You're awake!"

"Awake?" He-Man asked.

Teela gave a nervous laugh, choked with happiness. "It's a long story," she said as she held them close.

"I'll say," Dare said. Veena gave him a knowing look and returned his smile with one of her own.

It was then that Teela noticed the second Sorceress appear from behind Veena. Tears ran down Teela's face as she rushed toward her mother and embraced her, soon joined by her father, who cried with joy just as they did. "Mother," was all she could say.

"Shhh," The Sorceress said. "I'm just as happy to see you both as you are me."

"Can you stay?" Duncan asked, voicing the question that Teela shared, but couldn't bring herself to ask.

"My place is no longer among the living," she answered. "Though I would if I could. You know that."

Smiling broadly upon watching the family's reunion, Veena approached them. "You can stay, she said simply."

"But how?" The Sorceress asked, pulling away.

"What good would a goddess of life be if she couldn't give that gift freely?" Veena replied. Taking Teela 'Na's head in her hands, she breathed outward, the breath flowing into the woman's open mouth. With a gasp, The Sorceress inhaled, feeling life flowing through her body once more. "You've been a good and faithful

servant of Grayskull," Veena said. "You deserve your reward. My only request is that you continue to protect Castle Grayskull. I will be allowing it to remain."

"Can we visit her?" Dare asked, running toward them, overjoyed at the idea of his grandmother being able to stay in the waking world.

"Of course," Veena said with a laugh. "And this time, she can visit you, too. With Evelyn gone, the spell that kept The Sorceress a prisoner of the castle has faded."

He-Man, She-Ra and Randor walked toward their family and congratulated The Sorceress on her return. Each member, shared stories of the battle and what had happened while the twins were gone. In time, with the reunion behind them, both She-Ra and He-Man stepped back and returned to their usual forms. Due to the magical font they'd sipped from in Preternia with the Goddess's blessing, they still retained the power of Grayskull, but they were now Adam and Adora in appearance once again. Ram Man and a few of the other Masters' eyes grew wide upon seeing the change. He-Man's identity had always been known to a few, but was largely a secret, a secret that Adam no longer felt obliged to keep. Their greatest enemy had been defeated and he was merely happy to be home. Upon seeing them in their natural forms again, Randor embraced his daughter and son in turn. Everyone was overjoyed to see them, including Bow, Sea Hawk, Glimmer, and Gwildor, who ran toward them and began speaking with Adora excitedly. There was only one person missing. "Keldor," Adam said. He began walking toward Viper Tower, where he last saw his uncle during their earlier battle with Hordak.

He reached the foot of the massive conjoined structure and saw the king of Zalesia sitting silently at its base. Happy to find that his former enemy was still alive, Adam offered him his hand. After a moment of pause, Keldor reached up and took it, allowing Adam to help him to his feet. Adam placed his arm beneath Keldor's shoulders to help support him. The man who'd once been Skeletor had apparently healed from his impact with the tower, but was still suffering from the wound Adora had inflicted with the Soulslayer blade. The blow had been necessary to rid Keldor of the spirit of Karak Nul and finally free him of Skeletor's influence forever, the magical blade having sent the dark spirit into the endless void, never to return. "Is it done, boy?" Keldor asked, his voice a struggling rasp. "Is Hordak dead?"

"Yes," Adam replied. "It's done, Uncle. Now, let's get you to Veena. Maybe she can heal you."

"No," Keldor said, stopping Adam from walking anywhere with him. "I want this pain. I've earned it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Keldor," Adam argued. "C'mon."

Again, Keldor struggled to stay put. "No," he hissed. "I've earned it; deserve it. What am I supposed to do? Go and join your father and the others in celebration? Evelyn is dead. Zalesia has been destroyed for a second time. What is there for me to celebrate? There's nothing here for me now. Leave me."

"I won't," Adam said.

"You will," Keldor replied. "It's my choice. If I wanted anything from Veena, it would be Evelyn, but her fate has already been sealed. Her soul now belongs to Havok and protects what remains of the Temple of Zalesia, as her father did before her. It's the deal she made, just as I've now made my own." Indicating that he could now stand on his own, Keldor found his footing as Adam let him go. A bright light appeared behind them and Adam raised his eyes to see the familiar silhouette of Serpos standing in the doorway of her tower. "She has plans for me," Keldor explained, "made me an offer before you arrived. I accepted. My time here is at an end. Now, I go into exile. Perhaps we'll see each other again someday."

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Adam asked.

"What I want hardly matters anymore," Keldor replied solemnly. "I thought I was free, but I'm still a puppet. Just to a different goddess this time." He began to head up the stairs to join Serpos before turning back to Adam, meeting his gaze one final time. "You did well, Adam. You and your sister both. I'm proud of you." Facing the tower again, Serpos handed Keldor the Staff of Ka and, wrapping her arm around his shoulders gently, led the mourning warrior into her home.

When its door swung shut, Adam stared at Serpos Tower for a long moment before rejoining his family and the hurried conversations that were happening amongst them. Approaching the woman he'd known as Sorceress, Goddess, and friend, Adam greeted Veena warmly. "I've now met both you and your sister Serpos," he said, "but what about Havok? Will he be making an appearance?"

Veena gazed out over the battlefield, the ruins of Zalesia, and the aftermath of it all that surrounded them. "He already has, Adam, for change has already come, but I suspect his physical form will join us shortly. The Age of Zoar is at its end. The Three Towers will soon fade into the ether once more and you will all rebuild, as you always do. These things are already in motion and all is as it should be."

With a surprising quietness, the door to the Central Tower opened behind them and everyone gathered found their eyes drawn to it. An armored figure,

backlit, appeared in the doorway before making his way down the white marble steps toward them. In the light of the morning sun, they group laid eyes upon Havok himself, the first to do so in two thousand years. Clad in black armor, he bore a horned helm, the visor sculpted as a hissing cat, matching the face of the Central Tower that represented him. An otherworldy hush fell over them as he approached.

"Greetings, Brother," Veena said. "It's been a long time."

"Yes," he replied. His voice, much like those of his two sisters, was quiet and subdued, surprising Adam for a third time. At that moment, the door to Serpos Tower reopened and Serpos, now alone, walked out to join her siblings. "It's good to be together again," Havok said.

"Finally," Serpos agreed. "Perhaps it will last this time." With a final nod to Adam and the rest of the group, the three gods began walking toward the united tower, taking thier leave.

"But wait," Adam called after them, "whose age is it now, then? Havok's?"

The gods turned to face him. "Hmmm," Havok mused. "Yes, it is. However, my sisters and I have longed to be reunited for so long; longer than you can imagine. We have enough work of our own to do, without getting involved in your affairs. You've won a great victory. I think perhaps this age is my reward to you, you and all of our creations. You've earned the opportunity to forge your own destinies."

"If your journey these past few days has taught you anything, Adam, let it be that history is what you make it," Serpos added.

"So make it good," Veena finished. She gave him a warm smile and the three of them turned and entered the Central Tower, together for the first time in recorded history. When its gate closed, he wondered if he'd ever see them again.

Adora joined his side and placed her hand on his shoulder warmly. "Where's Keldor?" she asked.

"He's gone into exile with the help of Serpos," Adam replied. "I hope that he finds peace."

"Me too," Adora agreed.

"Do you think he'll be alright?" Adam asked.

Adora clutched the pendant that the Oracle gave her tightly in her free hand. "I have a feeling he'll be just fine. Lonely, but fine."

"Do you think we'll be alright?" he asked.

She smiled. "Now that, Brother, I'm sure of. In fact, I already have an idea for our next adventure together."

"Oh really?" Adam asked. "And what's that?"

"Duncan and our Father were telling me of their encounter with Shadow Weaver during the battle and I think there's a chance she's still out there. Father says her amulet was destroyed; that her power is gone."

"And?" he asked.

"And I want to find her," she replied.

Adam nodded in understanding. "You still care for her." It was less a question than a statement of fact.

Adora took a moment to consider his words. She wasn't sure herself, not until he'd mentioned it. "There was goodness within her, buried somewhere deep, despite Hordak's influence," she began. "When I left The Horde, it was because Shadow Weaver let me make my own choice. I can't forget that. I don't care about the evil creature she'd become, Adam, but Light Spinner," she paused, "I care about that spark of her that's left, and I want to see if that spark can grow into a flame. She may not be my real mother, but she's the only one I've ever known. I want to help her. I owe her that much."

"Then I'll be with you, every step of the way," he said.

The two of them embraced briefly before turning and rejoining their family, both Eternian and Etherian. Dozens of spectral falcons, avatars of the life goddess Zoar, swept over the battlefield, tending to the wounded and guiding the dead home. They had won. Consisting of beings from multiple kingdoms, and even different worlds and dimensions, they had all come together and cast out a pervasive darkness that had once seemed all-encompassing. As they simultaneously celebrated their victory and mourned their losses, the sun shone down on them, signaling not just a new day, but the dawn of a new age: an age of change and the wondrous unknown. The incredible stories of these warriors, though they would evolve and change over time, would never die. Like the kingdom of Eternia itself, their legend would live forever. It was the legend of a group of mortals who had been so powerful and righteous that the gods themselves had stepped aside, allowing them to rule their own destinies. They were more than heroic. They were more than legendary. They were the Masters of the Universe.

28.

FULL CIRCLE

Clad in shining gold armor and a red cape, the Eternian king made his way to the bridge of his capital ship at a brisk pace while piercing alarms blared all around him. In the years since the death of Hordak, the world he'd known as Tellus had changed considerably. The Council of Kings had welcomed the Age of Havok as a new dawn for peace, prosperity and invention. Once bitter rivalries were now a thing of the past, with the entire planet now united under one banner: the banner of Eternia. As ruler of this new Eternia, the king's title carried more responsibility than it had for any of his forefathers, and a sizeable amount of new burdens to go with it. The peace that would come after the Ultimate Battleground had lasted for many years, but as before, it would come to an end, this time not from The Horde, but a different otherworldly force known as the Space Mutants. First thought to be comprised of remnants of the Horde Empire, the Space Mutants had in fact originated from deep space, beyond the known area of the Eternians' own galaxy. The invaders had crept closer to the known systems over time, unnoticed, but once they'd announced their presence, there had been little to stop them. Ravaging several local planets on their way to the galaxy's center, they had been unprepared for a planet as united as Eternia and their new neutrino-powered arsenal. Fighting as one, the planet of Eternia's war with the Space Mutants had been largely

successful and, if their plan worked, this was to be their final victory against the invading force.

The gargantuan ship violently reeled from an explosion, causing the king to stagger into the bridge doorway, nearly losing his footing. "Will someone turn off that blasted noise?!" he bellowed. At his command, the alarms stopped. He had enough to think about without their incessant noise distracting him. Over the past several years, during what felt like an endless series of battles, the Eternian fleet had managed to destroy the entire Space Mutant armada, save for one ship. All that was left was Nordor's Gaze, the frigate that carried Flogg, the Space Mutant's leader. If the Eternians could manage to destroy Flogg and his ship, the war would finally be won, and peace would return to the planet they loved so much, and had sacrificed so much for. Presently, the enemy ship was ahead of them, racing beside some type of strange space anomaly that the Eternian ruler couldn't readily identify. It shimmered in the light of their sun and couldn't be any type of black hole or laser gate, at least not like one he'd ever seen. After a moment, a desperate Nordor's Gaze turned and entered the anomaly, disappearing from sight.

"What the blazes was that?" Lady Mara asked from her console. A recruit from a planet near the Space Mutant's own, she was now his second-in-command, for she had extensive knowledge of Flogg and his men, and was a formidable warrior. "Where did they go?"

"We're about to find out," he replied. "Enter that anomaly. We're following them."

She shot him a concerned look. "Are you sure? We don't even know what that thing is. They could have been destroyed by it."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. Flogg and his crew are the only Mutants left in this sector. We're finishing this for Eternia, and all of our neighboring planets that we've only recently liberated. Enter it. That's an order."

She nodded her understanding and began to steer the capital ship known as "Marlena's Heart" into the strange space fissure. As soon as they made contact with the mysterious phenomenon, the ship began to shake uncontrollably, threatening to fall apart at the seams. The king approached his command chair and held it tightly as they traveled through it. Mere moments later, they emerged on the other side, but the Space Mutant's ship was nowhere to be seen. "Where are they?" he asked.

"I don't know, Your Majesty," Mara replied in a panicked tone. "Our scopes are down." Soon after she said the words, the ship's lights flickered and went out,

the red backup lights coming on seconds later. "Shields, too. Almost everything's down." An explosion rocked them and the king was once again nearly knocked to the floor by the impact. He quickly looked out of the viewport to find both the stars and Nordor's Gaze, which approached from their right side, having apparently been at their rear when the Eternian ship had emerged from the anomaly. The enemy ship was headed toward them at a leisurely pace. There was no need for the Space Mutants to hurry, and they knew it. Listing to the right, Marlena's Heart appeared to be figuratively dead in the water. "Status report?!" the king commanded.

"From what readings I've got, I can tell you that we've sustained heavy damage," Clamp Champ called out from his terminal. "With our shields down, that last blast just about did us in. It's opened a breach in the outer hull's starboard side, in one of the cargo holds. One more hit there, Sire, and we're space debris."

"They won't fire again," The king said, drawing the Star Sword from its sheath on his back, the weapon glinting with an otherworldly shine. It was his father's sword, left to him only a few years prior, but the war with Flogg and his mutants had made those years feel like a lifetime. "Prepare for their boarding party," King Dare commanded, not allowing his voice to waver, though his confidence threatened to do so, "and tell Eldor to get to that breach as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Clamp Champ quickly replied, bringing up the wizard on his wrist-mounted holocommunicator and issuing the order.

Turning, Dare strode toward the bridge entrance. "My Liege, forgive my candor, but where are you going?" Mara called after him.

"To join him in the fight," Dare replied, looking back. "There's nothing I can do from here. Try to get the ship back up and running. If that's not possible, you're all to get to the escape pods and abandon ship. Do not wait for me, you understand? Just get to safety. Consider it an order." Rushing back out into the ship's main corridor, Dare slid to his left as the ship continued to tilt. He realized that before long he may have to run along the very wall. Catching sight of himself in the ship's reflective inner hull, he couldn't help but take a split second to be amused at how he'd aged. With short brown hair and a muscular body that rivaled that of He-Man himself, he'd grown up to look much different than he'd expected when he'd imagined his older self during his stay in the Dreaming as a child. Although he'd been only a boy when he'd touched the Orb of Grayskull, absorbing its essence into his body had obviously had quite an effect on him. It had taken years to develop, but he now had the power. Finding his footing once more, Dare snapped his thoughts back to the present and was joined by a contingent of guards as he continued to the hull breach. He reached the cargo hold just as the ship

lurched back upright once more, this time from the impact of Nordor's Gaze docking with them. The breach itself was small, Dare noticed, being a cut perhaps the length of a hand and barely wide enough to slide a piece of parchment though. Still, it was enough to make the air in the room feel thin already. He reached to the rear of his belt and removed his breather, which would provide him with about an hour's oxygen. The guards with him followed suit. Clutching the Star Sword tightly, Dare awaited the arrival of Flogg. He knew that the Space Mutant leader would want to witness his victory first-hand. Simply blowing them into bits wouldn't be enough for someone like him.

Dare smiled in greeting as Eldor, the man who'd been his teacher and mentor since his childhood, approached with his own breather in place over his beard. Granted an unnaturally long life by an old spell, the wizened wizard still appeared exactly as he had the day Dare had met him, albeit now in more traditional garb, no longer controlled by Veena's spell of Scrolllos. After the Ultimate Battleground, Eldor had been tasked by Dare's parents to train him in the ways of magic. Dare had always had an affinity for it, but as he'd gotten older, it had become harder and harder for him to control. The wizard had been patient with him and helped Dare harness his power over the years. With Dare's parents now gone and his aunt Adora retired to a life of peace back on Etheria, Eldor was the closest thing to family the young monarch had left.

The wizard held his new golden staff in his right hand. The staff was bonded to the Spell Stone, a gift to the man from Dare's Aunt. She'd no longer had a use for it, and considered the gift as simply returning the stone to its owner. Although she'd given up the magical artifact, Adora had kept the Sword of Power it had been joined with out of sentimental value. It had belonged to both King Grayskull and her twin brother, after all, and was a link to her family that she would always cherish. "It's good to see that you are unharmed, My King," the man greeted him, his voice muffled slightly by his breather.

"Please, Eldor, you know I hate it when you do that," Dare replied. "You've known me since I was waist-high. Besides, now's not the time for formality. We've fought together in many battles, but I fear we may not escape this one. Marlena's Heart is dead."

"It's just a ship, Dare. So long as you survive, that's all that matters."

"I've never understood why you think I'm so important," Dare said.

"Remind me to tell you someday," Eldor replied jokingly, but his smile quickly faded as the sound of a pressurized airlock latched into place outside the breach. Within seconds, they began to hear a cutting tool being utilized to expand the

breach into an opening large enough for the Space Mutants to enter the Eternian ship with. It wasn't long before they did just that, only to be attacked immediately by the royal guards. Despite the guards' best efforts, however, the mutants soon managed to board. Upon their attack, Dare swung the Star Sword with expert precision, eliminating each invader before they could make it any farther, waiting for Flogg himself to show his ugly face.

After dispatching nearly two dozen Space Mutants, Dare and his men had apparently reached the end of them, as Flogg himself stepped into the cargo hold, a detonator in his right hand, a bomb in his left. Glancing to Dare, then at the detonator and back once more, Flogg grinned. "What? You didn't think I'd walk in here without some type of insurance, did you?"

"You've lost, Flogg," Dare told him. "Disarm your device and come with us quietly. You'll be imprisoned, but at least you won't die here in the cold of space. Seems like a fair trade to me."

Flogg laughed. "How very noble of you, but what I do with this hardly matters. Our ship is as spent as yours. We only barely managed to dock with you. Whatever that fissure we passed through was, it wasn't worth the gamble to escape you. It's only a matter of time before the docking airlock fails and we all get sucked into the vacuum of space. This device has merely allowed me to witness my victory over you in person. We're going to die here, King Dare. Each and every one of us. Nothing can stop that now." He looked to Eldor and raised his brow curiously. "But I suspect that you already know that, don't you, Wizard?"

"What does he mean?" Dare asked.

"Ignore him," Eldor replied. "He knows nothing."

"Nothing, eh?" Flogg asked. "Far from it. I know that this is where your family bloodline ends, King Dare, once and for all."

Eldor shook his head, staff at the ready, already glowing in anticipation. "The Grayskull bloodline never ends," the mage replied. "It begins. Over and over again."

"We'll see," Flogg said. With a sickly grin, he set off the device, causing the cargo hold to explode all around them.

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Dare awoke with a start to find himself in an escape pod, hurtling toward a planet that the unit's computer had identified as "Eternia," but that was impossible. Wasn't it? All he knew was that his head ached something awful. With some difficulty, his eyes focused on Eldor, who was seated across from him. The pod was a two-seater, the smallest found aboard Marlena's Heart, located near the cargo holds. "How are we not dead?" he asked, his head swimming. The blast had practically gone off in their faces. How could they have possibly survived such a thing? Looking to the rear of the multi-windowed pod, he saw what remained of both Marlena's Heart and Nordor's Gaze: large chunks of metal that hurtled though space. Seeing no other pods, he took a moment to mourn the likely loss of his friends and crew.

"I was able to use the Spell Stone to shield the two of us long enough to get aboard," Eldor answered. "We're heading home, but you need to understand that it won't be the same as when we left."

"Why?" Dare asked, still groggy. While it was true that they'd been gone for some time, they should have heard any important news quite quickly, provided something hadn't happened after Marlena's Heart had lost most of its power. The king's head continued to pound violently and now that pain was compounded by worry for his home, and for his friends and subjects. Dare felt his forehead and when he removed his hand, saw that it was red with blood. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Actually," the wizard replied, "it's what hasn't. This day came sooner than I expected."

"What the blazes does that mean, Eldor?" Dare demanded. "My head aches enough as it is without your constant riddles." Outside the windows, the planet, lush and vibrant, appeared to grow ever larger as they screamed toward one of its mountains.

"In all of your lessons regarding the history of the Grayskull bloodline," Eldor said, "I never told you the most interesting part about it."

"And what's that?" Dare asked.

Eldor's tone grew solemn. "It repeats itself."

"I don't understa—" Dare began, but his words were drowned out by the ignition of the compressed air that surrounded them as they entered the atmosphere, with the crash that followed silencing all thought, bringing only the comfort of darkness.

• • •

Dare awoke once more, this time surrounded by the debris of the escape pod. Somehow, he'd survived without a scratch, despite apparently having been thrown from the pod during the crash. His head also no longer ached, though it was still wet with blood, as it had been before. Next to him lay Eldor, the old man's breathing labored. After years of war, Dare quickly recognized that his friend wasn't going to survive. "Eldor?" he called.

"Still... here," his teacher answered. "Used what... magic I had left... to heal you."

"Old fool, you should have used it on yourself," Dare replied, sadness welling up within him as he knelt near his mentor and clasped his hand.

"I've lived... long enough," Eldor said with a gasp. "Much too long, in fact. You must survive, Dare. It's just the way things are... have always been. Besides, I'd want you to. You're like a son—" the man trailed off, never to finish. Closing Eldor's eyes, Dare wiped a tear away from his own as he stood and took in his surroundings. If this was Eternia, it didn't look like any part of the planet he'd ever seen before. All around him was lush jungle, but with vicious-looking predatory plants he couldn't identify and the heat was intense, more so than he'd ever previously experienced. Retrieving the Star Sword from the wreckage of the pod, he used its immense power to make a hole in the ground nearby, large enough for his friend's body. After giving Eldor as proper a burial as he could manage in the jungle, Dare stopped a moment before picking up the wizard's golden staff and carrying it with him as he left the crash site. The Spell Stone was too important to leave behind for someone else to find. Dare supposed it was his now. After all of his years of training, he was well-aware of how to use it and suspected that Eldor would have wanted him to have it.

A loud roar emanated from the distance, causing Dare to snap his head to his left. It was a strange kind of sound that he'd never heard, even with his many adventures across Eternia and beyond. Perhaps his using the Star Sword had drawn attention to his location. He wasn't sure what had made that noise, but he wasn't waiting around to find out. Walking faster, he made his way through the brush until he came to a clearing and looked out over it. From his vantage point, he could see not only turbodactyls, flying lizards long-thought extinct, but dozens of giant bionotops roaming the jungle below him. From their left, a tyrantisaurus

crashed through the tree line, causing the herd of bionotops to stampede away in terror. These creatures all had at least one thing in common. They weren't supposed to be here. "What in the worlds?" he asked aloud. "Maybe I've landed in some undiscovered land, where these beasts still exist?" he reasoned. Any other answer made no sense to him; not in his bewildered state. At any rate, there was no way he was going to continue forward into the clearing. It was obviously too dangerous. Instead, he took a sharp right and continued into the dense jungle.

Some time later, his mind still reeling, Dare came upon a cave, where he hoped to find some rest. Inside, he was surprised to find two large animal hides laid out on the floor as if they were beds. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw the remains of a fire and some rudimentary tools. Hearing a woman's scream, he ran back out of the cave to find a giant sabretooth cat blocking two people, a man and a woman, from entering. Using the Spell Stone, he managed to scare the giant cat off without hurting it, though he suspected that it would be back. "What is going on?" he asked them, praying that they would be able to understand him.

"You save us," the man replied. His skin was bronzed from the sun, his hair bleached by it. He looked powerful, despite being clothed only in a simple loincloth. Beside him was a beautiful brunette woman dressed much the same. Her long hair, naturally dreadlocked, was pulled forward, covering her chest. Dare noticed that she was staring at him with an almost unsettling intensity. She'd obviously never seen anyone dressed like him before. Whatever mysterious land he was in, these people appeared to be natives.

"Where am I?" Dare asked.

The man gestured toward the cave. "Home."

"Yes, but I mean, where in the world?"

The man shrugged. "Home," he repeated. "Not know more."

"Does she know?" Dare asked, indicating the woman.

"She cannot speak your tongue," the man replied. "I learned it as a boy, but not heard since."

"Do you have a name?" Dare inquired with dawning realization.

The man replied with a grunt that sounded like "Torak."

"Torak?" Dare asked. "This is your name?"

Torak nodded, indicating the woman next to him. "Bree 'Na. Sister." After

a pause, the native spoke again, but slower, carefully mimicking the sounds of Dare's earlier question, "Do you have a name?"

Dare looked to the Star Sword in his left hand and the Spell Stone staff in his right. His eyes traced the line of smoke from where his escape pod had entered orbit. He thought of the anomaly they'd passed through, of the creatures he'd seen upon his arrival and the words of his friend before they'd crashed, that when it came to the Grayskull bloodline, history repeated itself. He sighed. "You've got to be kidding me," he said aloud.

"That is strange name," Torak replied.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Torak. That's not my name."

"Then name is?" the native inquired again.

Shifting his gaze from the skies back toward the two strangers who stood before him, Dare answered. "My name is Ro," he said with a look of realization before, wanting to honor his father, he added, "He-Ro."

THE BEGINNING

AFTERWORD

So... this is it. The story is over. Well, sort of. In some ways, it goes on. One of my goals, particularly when I got closer to the finish line of "The Power of Grayskull" was that all three books, which I collectively call "The Bloodline Trilogy," would culminate with a multi-layered ending. It would have to be definitive in its own way, but also show that Adam and Adora's adventures weren't over yet, and that the same would be true for other characters. One of the other themes of the trilogy was that there was always hope for redemption, even for those that have made horrible choices in their lives, or are downright wicked. Other than the Grayskull bloodline, redemption was the main recurring theme throughout the trilogy, first with Evelyn, then with Adora and Keldor, and now, perhaps even with Shadow Weaver embodying that idea. Between that and the multi-layered ending, I hope that I accomplished both of those goals. I think I did.

Not everyone got a happy ending, though. We now know that Keldor and Evelyn would live on beyond these stories, but with both occupying sad and lonely roles. There are a few ways that I could have played the "Deus Ex Machina" card and undone their fates (I mean, I literally had gods as characters), letting them live happily ever after, and I even toyed with that idea because I love those characters so much... but it never felt right to me. Where both Keldor and Evelyn would

ultimately end up was something that was conceived early on in the writing process (even as I was working on “King Skeletor,” which would eventually evolve into “Legacies”), and it really just came down to having to say, “well, that’s the story.” As a fan, I wanted to save them both, but I also knew it wasn’t right to do so. As much as I control the writing process itself with these stories, I don’t get to “play god” as much as you might think. When I write, it often feels like the story already exists somewhere, fully formed. I just write it down in order to share it with others. So could I have saved them from their fates? Yes. But should I have? No. So I didn’t. It’s sad (even for me), but again, that’s the story.

However, other ideas were more fluid. The idea that Scrolllos was actually Eldor, who would reveal himself to have been serving his king’s bloodline all along, even centuries after D’Vann Grayskull’s death, and that Dare would become He-Ro, came and went as I wrote the story. In was in my earliest notes, before I’d even started work on the actual book, but writing the original ending “in the moment,” I decided to excise the idea altogether. I thought it was just too many connections between the different timelines. I didn’t realize that those connections would, in a way, form the third theme of the trilogy, the aurorborous-like repetition within the stories, not just of various weapons and objects, but of the bloodline itself. The theme had always been there, I just hadn’t realized it. My eagle-eyed Beta Reader, Christopher Glen Dahlberg, picked up on the various clues that I’d laid out during the story and wondered why I hadn’t done it. It seemed like a missed opportunity to him. His discovering this thread (which I’d thought was less obvious, ha ha) convinced me that I should include it afterall, and I’m glad I did. I think the overall story of the trilogy is better for it.

Another interesting note is that I would imagine that anyone reading this story would assume that I really hate Mer-Man, due to the amount of “I never liked him anyway” type jokes thrown his way. In truth, Mer-Man was my favorite as a kid. I loved the toy (a regular bathtime buddy) and loved doing the voice from the cartoon. I truly don’t know why he got picked on a bit in this story. I guess I just thought it was funny. Regardless, Mer-Man rules!

So, back to the goals I had with “The Power of Grayskull” and the trilogy in general. I did want the stories to feel as if they could continue, but there won’t be any more, at least not from me. In other words, I won’t be writing “The He-Ro Chronicles,” although I think they’d be cool. The sheer amount of work that went into making these stories, especially the last two, would probably surprise people. While I’ve enjoyed my time writing them and sharing them with you, I’m more than ready to move on. I know I said that after “Legacies” too, but I swear I mean it this

time. Back then, I still had too many open threads to close. The story obviously wasn't finished and it bothered me. Now it is, and I can let it go.

When it comes down to it, the real goal of this entire project was for me to become a better writer. It all started as a series of short stories based on Keldor, which I've mentioned before. At those days, it was just something simple and fun for me to work on. Eventually, it would become a lot more. Writing "The Bloodline Trilogy" was ultimately a learning experience, and now that the third and final story is behind me, I feel as if I've finally taken off the training wheels. I actually feel like I know what I'm doing now as a writer, or at least have a good idea of what I need to do. I have a long way to go, but I'm also a hell of a lot further along than I was when I started this project. I know that, and it makes me happy. After failing to write so many stories over the years that I'd envisioned, but never saw to fruition, I'll gladly take it.

The other thing that makes me happy is you. Yes, you. Thank you. Thank you for reading these silly things. Thank you for waiting patiently as I developed "The Power of Grayskull," which is to date my most ambitious and complete work (with the most hours put into it, for sure). Thank you for your words of encouragement and love and all of the wonderful compliments on these stories that I've received over the years. It means the world to me, it really does. In a lot of ways, you all kept me going and now we're here at the finish line together. In truth, I wrote these stories for myself, as the kind of MOTU stories that I myself wanted to read, but I always hoped that you would enjoy them too. I wanted to make you happy, and while I always stayed true to my story, I put in that extra effort to make them the best that I could for you. In the end, you've helped me become a better writer, and I can't thank you enough for that. My days writing MOTU may be over, but my days of writing in general have only just begun. I hope you'll give my other stuff a try some day. Maybe then I can actually earn a buck or two for all of my hard work, LOL. I kid, I kid. Thanks again. You're the best.

Sincerely,

-Matt

PS: Additional thanks go out to three people in particular:

To my wife Wendy for helping me more than I can ever express and being my inspiration. You guys and gals have no idea how instrumental she was in helping me develop these stories, bouncing ideas back and forth and even editing the works themselves. I couldn't ask for a better partner in writing or in life. These stories wouldn't be what they are without her. Not even close.

To artist extraordinaire Mattias Fahlberg for doing not just one, but all three awesome covers. It's easy to see how you've grown as an artist from "The Keldor Chronicles" to "The Power of Grayskull." I love them all, but this final cover is the best yet. You've been a joy to work with and I hope we get to work together again in the future.

Thank you also to my Beta Reader, Christopher Glen Dahlberg. You caught a lot of things that, despite having read the book several times myself, were missed by me. Sometimes you become blind to the little things the more you stare at the pages and it's always good to get some fresh eyes on them. Also, your noticing that the Dare/Eldor revelations were missing, and my subsequently putting them back into the book, really made for a nice ending, complete with an entirely new chapter. I'd more or less chickened out on doing those revelations at the last minute, and I'm glad you helped convince me that it was actually a good idea. I think it tied up the entire trilogy in a really nice way. Besides that, having worked on this book in a vacuum for some time, it was nice to talk about the story in general with another fan and get their feel for it, so thanks for that as well. Not every suggestion made it in, but quite a few did.

The character "Torak," who appears in the final scene, was created by Mark Taylor, the father of what would become the foundation of MOTU, and is used by me with much love and respect. He was around many years before He-Man in the real world, and it's only fitting that my story followed suit. Click the pic below to learn more, thanks to the awesome Battle-Ram blog:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Matthew C. Kayser is a longtime MOTU fan who fondly remembers staging epic battles in his yard with a slew of different "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe" action figures. As a child in the 80's, his favorite was Mer-Man. As an adult, it has become Keldor/Skeletor (naturally).

He currently lives in Tennessee with his wife Wendy and their cats, who form their own "Great Rebellion" whenever it's time to eat.

The best way to contact Matt is through the official ["MOTU: The Bloodline Trilogy" Facebook page](#). He also has an [author page](#) and a [Twitter account](#).

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