

Act of War by Cheezey

Part Two

While Allura was safely on her way to Arus with Haggar, Lotor and Cossack and their fleet of attack ships wasted no time heading back to Pollux. The ego wound Lotor had sustained from the previous run-in on Pollux was still quite raw, and he was quite motivated to return the favor in spades. Aboard another of the battleships, Commander Cossack was equally ready to engage the Polluxians; not because he was frothing mad like Lotor, but because he always enjoyed a good invasion and the bonus of knowing they were going to knock the half-pint prince of Pollux down a few pegs made it even more appealing.

Their less than subtle approach did not go unnoticed, and no sooner had they entered Pollux's airspace when they found themselves greeted not by a video hail but by a barrage of laser fire. The Doomites had expected no less than a hostile greeting, however, and the initial blasts deflected harmlessly off their shields.

"Hey, that tickled!" Cossack chortled over the airwaves.

"Prince Bandor needs to learn some royal manners, I see," Lotor sneered in response. "And to respect his superiors." He keyed in the frequency to hail the control center within Castle Pollux. "Why Bandor, how very rude of you to greet us this way... when all we did was come to ask you again nicely to turn over the red lion that belongs to us."

Bandor's angry countenance appeared on the screen. "I told you before and I'm telling you again, you'll get your hands on that red lion over my dead body. The people of Pollux will protect the spirit of Voltron with our lives."

"Then the people of Pollux have a fool for a leader, if he'll trade their precious lives for something that's not only dead but doesn't even rightfully belong to him." He ordered his soldiers to target the castle with their laser cannons and fire. Cossack's ship, along with the others in their fleet, followed suit.

The screen jumbled, but Bandor remained steadfast. “We won’t surrender ourselves or the red lion to scum like you!”

“They belong to Princess Allura,” Lotor asserted sternly. “And I’ll take it back for her if Lance won’t surrender it willingly.” To make his point, he concentrated his fire again. Castle Pollux returned with a volley of shots of their own, but the Doom ships’ shields were stronger and there were more of them, so they were not overly concerned. Still, on Cossack’s orders a squadron of air fighters took off from one of the other battleships and began targeting the castle guns.

Lotor folded his arms smugly. “Don’t make an even bigger fool out of yourself than you already have, Bandor. Surrender and we’ll spare your people, perhaps even your loved ones, if you turn out the red lion and his pilot. Harbor them, and you and all of Pollux will pay the price.”

The lights in the background around Bandor flickered under the heavier fire, and although the transmission remained open, Bandor could be seen trying to maintain his balance as well as his cool, and he had at best a tenuous hold on either. “Never!”

A supporting hand fell on Bandor’s shoulder and the angry face of Sven appeared behind him. Further in the shadows the outline and garbled voice of Romelle, presumably shouting orders at others farther back, could be heard, but that was drowned out between the sound of an explosion hitting close to their location and a sudden and outraged outburst from Sven. “Princess Allura would never condone an attack on the people of Pollux over a lion!”

“Ah, but Princess Allura isn’t here this time,” Cossack’s incongruously calm and mocking voice responded. “And we don’t negotiate like Arusians.”

A sinister smile spread across Lotor’s lips. “We’re merely acting on their behalf.”

“Allura would never want you to do this, you monster!” Romelle seethed viciously, shoving her way past her brother and Sven to glower at the screen. “She was a fool for thinking there was anything worth saving in you.” Bandor meanwhile shook his fist at the screen and slammed his other hand down on a panel that released more laser fire in their general direction, although it did

little good. None of the Doom ships sustained serious damage from it, and Castle Pollux's shields and power were reaching critical low levels.

Lotor found Romelle's indignant outburst amusing, and laughed in response to it. "And how will she find out? Do you think she'll believe anything you or your friends have to say after you harbored the so-called friend that stole her property and fired on her when she peacefully asked for it back? Or will she believe the one who'd do anything to see to it she gets what she needs, what's rightfully hers, who holds her and comforts her after all the others she trusted have turned on her?"

Romelle hissed in wordless rage and lunged at the screen, but was knocked backward when a powerful blast broke through a weak spot in the castle shields, causing the entire structure to quake. Lotor and Cossack, both witness to it, laughed heartily at the staticky image of her being knocked rump over teakettle.

"Your tantrums are quite amusing, Romelle. It's a pity that we won't have time to chat more. But I'm afraid we have a lion to recover, by any means necessary."

"See you soon!" Cossack echoed in mock joviality, while Lotor terminated the transmission with a strategically targeted cannon blast that struck the castle wall directly above the control center, knocking out the room's power altogether.

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In the chaotic darkness of Castle Pollux's control room, Sven helped Romelle to her feet while Bander scrambled to find a console that could still transmit a distress signal powerful enough to traverse space. Armed with a laser rifle, Hunk ran into the room, short of breath from the sprint he had just made to get there from a now destroyed gun turret. "They've released a robeast," he said grimly. "We gotta get help, pronto."

"We're trying," Bander responded in an equally frantic tone. "I think I got a distress code out to the Alliance headquarters before our power went out, but I don't have confirmation."

“What about Lance?”

“I tried the radio as soon as we saw the Doom ships on our radar.” Although Sven was calmer than the others, he was still noticeably harried. “He didn’t answer, but I’m not surprised.”

“I just pray he heard us.” Romelle closed her eyes and clenched her fists, taking in a steadying breath. “I tried calling too; we sent several transmissions.”

Sven reached under the console where a few emergency laser pistols were stored. “We’ll have to fight with whatever we’ve got left. The robeast will have to be drawn away from the castle.”

“Damn Lotor,” Romelle swore in an angry whisper. “I hate him.”

Sven and Hunk’s communicators, both standard issue of the Castle Pollux guards, sounded simultaneously. Although different guards were reporting in to them, the news was the same—one of Doom’s battleships had deployed ground forces that were headed toward the castle along with the robeast.

“We don’t have the means to fight that, do we?” Romelle looked from her brother to Sven and Hunk, a grim look in her eyes.

“No.” Bandor swallowed hard and forced himself to stay strong despite his rising fear.

Romelle paled, although in the dim emergency lighting none of them could tell. “What do we do now then?”

“Only thing we can do,” Hunk said gravely, and cocked his laser rifle. “Fight ‘em as best we can.”

“And do what we can to save as many lives as we can,” Sven added.

“Starting with you, Sis,” Bandor finished, stepping forward decisively and taking Romelle’s hand.

She looked wildly from Bandor to Sven. “What?”

“I want you to go through the evacuation tunnels and get as far away from the castle as you can.” Bandor looked to Sven. “You go with her.”

“What? You can’t expect me to run!” the shocked Romelle retorted, wrenching her hand from Bandor’s grasp. “I’m not running from Lotor! This is my home and I’m going to defend it with you!”

“Would you rather die in it?” Bandor hollered back. “We’re outgunned and our defenses are down! If help doesn’t show up, that robeast could destroy the whole place!”

“Then I’ll fight with you,” Romelle argued determinedly. “Lotor already cost us Avok and our father; I won’t run like a coward any more than you will!”

His patience gone and his temper at his limit, Bandor ignored his sister’s protests and shoved her in Sven’s direction. “I’m not gonna fight with you, Romelle! If we both stay here and die, Pollux will fall and there’ll be nobody keeping order with whatever’s left. Who knows what’ll happen to it and our people?” he argued with desperation. “If we split up our odds are better.”

Sven gave a grave nod of agreement. “Bandor is right. I don’t want to run either, but we don’t have a choice. And someone needs to lead those who can’t fight to safety.”

Remembering that there were such individuals in the castle—older servants, children, families of the court, Romelle realized that she had to do as Bandor asked. “I—I guess you’re right.” She gripped the pistol in her hand more tightly. “We’ll try to get as many as we can out.”

“We’ll keep their attention up front and get you as much time as we can,” Hunk assured them. “Try to cover your tracks so they can’t hunt you down.”

Both Sven and Romelle nodded. “We will.”

“Good luck,” Sven said to his friends as they parted. “We’re all going to need it.”

As Sven and Romelle fled together down the hallway, Hunk and Bandor readied their weapons and hurried to the main gates of Castle Pollux, where they saw the hideous robeast Lotor and Cossack had unleashed. The creature roared its way through the courtyard, viciously slaughtering every guardsman that crossed its path. Screams and cries filled the air, silenced only by the intermittent explosions of laser cannons striking walls. The smell of smoke, blood, and death permeated the air.

Bandor and Hunk fought their way past advancing enemy troops, doing their best to keep the soldiers from entering the castle proper, but it was a losing proposition. They were hopelessly outnumbered and with the castle’s wall defenses offline there was little they could do but delay the inevitable. That was made inescapably clear a few moments later, when a barrage of fire from Lotor’s ship brought one of the castle towers down in a deafening collapse. The two of them, and the guards around them, barely had the chance to take in what had happened before Cossack’s battleship targeted the castle’s center roof and caved that in as well.

“Lotor, you bastard!” Enraged and emotional, Bandor ran out into the thick of the courtyard wildly firing at everything in his path, and only narrowly avoided being stepped on by the

robeast as it began to scale one of the remaining intact castle walls. The creature let out an unearthly roar and swiped at some of the guards firing upon it.

Bandor's rage was cut short when an approaching group of Doom soldiers opened fire in his direction. Hunk barely had the time to shout a frantic, "Bandor!" before a laser blast struck the young prince directly in the left side, knocking him to the ground and leaving him unmoving and silent.

Hunk was not able to reach Bandor before he and the three guardsmen that were close at his heels found themselves surrounded by an entourage of Doom soldiers. Their commanding officer, an all-too-familiar figure, stepped forward to eye up his men's handiwork. "Well, that takes care of Prince Pipsqueak," Commander Cossack quipped as he sneered at Hunk, who he recognized immediately. "And it looks like we've got us an ex-Voltron flyboy as well."

Furious, Hunk let out a snarl and fired at the enemy soldiers, striking one and causing the others, including Cossack, to duck and reorient. "You're gonna pay for this!"

"Nah, not my tab," the unfazed Cossack retorted, and with a precise whish, knocked the rifle from Hunk's hands with his electrolash. Corresponding blasts from the Doom soldiers left two of the guards behind Hunk dead and the third clutching a gruesome shoulder wound in agony. Hunk himself received not only a stinging burn on his arm from the electrolash, but also a painful laser wound in his thigh that literally brought him to his knees in front of Cossack.

Adding insult as well as further injury, Cossack lashed Hunk once more with his weapon, that time in the back, and gave his uninjured leg a swift kick for good measure. "I'd tell you to surrender, but you Voltron fools always go on about how you never give up and we evil-doers will never win, so if it's all the same I'd rather skip that whole speech."

"You won't take Pollux," Hunk seethed with labored breath. He gritted his teeth and resisted as best he could as the Doom guards sought to grab and chain him. He was no longer in much of a condition to fight, but he would not let them take him without one.

Cossack let out a glib chortle, amused at the Voltron pilot's token resistance and vain protests. "That's funny, I think we just did!" He motioned toward his ship. "Take our Voltron Force prize to Prince Lotor, and load up any prisoners that'll make good slaves. Leave the rest for robeast food and fertilizer." He sneered in the fallen Bandor's direction. "Though if I was a robeast, I don't think I'd want to eat that. Barely makes a snack."

"Yes sir," one of the guards responded. They shoved the struggling Hunk toward one of the transports, while Cossack turned toward another group of soldiers.

"You guys scout for any sign of Princess Romelle, the other Voltron fools, and especially that red lion. Try to take them alive, since Lotor'll want to deal with them personally, but get the red lion at any cost, no matter what. Got it?"

"Yes Commander Cossack," they echoed in response.

"Good." Cossack lashed his electrolash through the smoky air once more just for fun, and gave Prince Bandor's limp form a symbolic kick with his pointy-toed boot. He then out a hearty laugh, savoring the sight of the robeast tearing Castle Pollux and those that resisted them in it to pieces.

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Lance pushed the red lion to its limits in speed heading toward Pollux. "Don't let me be too late!" he said urgently, although there was no one flying with him to hear him. In the time since he had left Pollux he had put a good distance between himself and the world. He had hoped that leaving would ensure his friends' safety, but the staticky pleas for help he had received on the agreed frequency had just proven his decision to be one made in folly.

Urgently trying to squeeze the slightest bit more speed out of the red lion, Lance eyed the empty space that lay between him and his friends that needed him. "Hang on guys, I'm on my way!"

* * *

Unaware of what had happened to her brother but all too aware of how the castle was falling apart around her, Romelle led Sven and several members of the castle staff and court through dark and dank underground tunnels that would eventually lead to an escape from the castle. There were a little over twenty of them altogether; not all that many considering how many staffed and resided in the castle, but many had insisted on staying to help fight Lotor's soldiers, even ones that were in no condition to do so. Romelle and Sven both prayed that the bravery and loyalty of those people would not be repaid with death or enslavement.

Thus far they had not been pursued. They hoped meant that they had not been spotted and that their escape route—which originated as a hidden door in one of the castle's root and grain cellars—had not been found by the enemy. Unfortunately there was no safe haven awaiting them at the end; the tunnels ended at a rocky cave opening in a thicket of trees about a mile and a half west of the castle. There were no buildings nearby with supplies and no obvious natural shelters, for the tunnels were originally designed as an evacuation route and not a refuge. Sven and Romelle supposed that it worked in their favor that there were no such structures, for as long as they and the refugees remained out of sight until night fell, none of the enemy would bother looking for them in such a place. The tunnels themselves were cold, low, and dark, but they would provide minimal shelter from the elements, and after the battle was over, they would have some time to figure out where to go under the cover of darkness.

Even in their hurry to get to safety, the trek through the tunnels was slow. In parts the ceiling was low enough that all but the children and shortest adults had to duck, and the floor was slick and uneven. The air was stale and the stink of mildew was overpowering, and more than a few bugs skittered past them on their way. Some of the older refugees and ones carrying children too young to walk moved more slowly as well, and every time they heard a sound ahead of or behind them, they wondered if it meant that they had been discovered and were being chased.

The sounds of battle grew more distant, although no less ominous, and after what felt like an eternity they came to what appeared to be a dead end. In actuality it was not, rather it was a steep slope, about six feet in length, which led upwards to the hole in the ground that marked the outside entrance to their tunnel.

"This is it," Romelle told her companions with a breath of relief. "We made it."

“But before any of us go out, let me check that it’s safe,” Sven said before anyone else could speak. With some effort he scaled the incline and poked his head out. The evergreen trees above blocked much of the daylight, but to his relief he heard and saw no sign of anything but wildlife nearby. He climbed out the rest of the way and to his relief, still saw no danger. Still, he kept a firm hold on his laser pistol. Turning back toward the cave opening he called, “It’s all clear!”

Romelle emerged next, and over the next several minutes they helped the rest of the escapees from Castle Pollux out into the fresh air. Once everyone was out, Sven walked to the edge of the tree line and looked in the direction of the castle, still under siege. Though the hilly landscape prevented a clear view, the tops of the towers should have been visible from where they were, and much to his shock and sorrow, they were not. Instead all he saw was an ugly dark cloud of smoke, flashes of laser fire, and the silhouettes of the Doom ships in the sky. The sounds of the battle could still be heard—blasts, rumblings, and the faintest hints of what had to be the robeast’s screeches—and that painted an even more ominous picture of what was happening.

“Oh...” Romelle’s sorrowful voice came from beside him, startling him as he had not realized that she had approached.

“It’s bad,” he said softly, and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Do you think that Bandor... do you think they could survive? It looks like the castle’s gone.” Her eyes clouded with tears.

Sven was unable to take his eyes off of the terrible scene, but he held her closer nonetheless. “We have to hope that they do.”

“It’s hard to have much hope with all that Lotor’s destroyed.” Her voice began to choke up. “My family, my friends, now my home...”

Now in a tight embrace, Sven patted Romelle's back, wishing that he had some words of comfort to give or some way to reassure her that things were not as grim as they seemed. Then, as if the cosmos sought to grant him that reassurance, a bright object appeared in the sky above them, a swift-moving ship with a telltale reddish shimmering streak in its wake.

"Look!"

Romelle followed Sven's gaze upward and hope filled her wet eyes at it had Sven's when he said it. "The red lion! Lance heard us!"

"I knew he wouldn't let us down if he got the message," Sven said with a wan smile. "I just hope he's not too late."

"Me too, Sven." The princess rested her head on Sven's chest and watched as their last hope flew into the thick of the battle by the castle. "Me too."

* * *

Aboard the bridge of his battleship, Lotor let out a hearty cackle when he saw the red lion approach. "So, Lance wasn't actually on Pollux anymore," he said, finding a delightful irony in decimating the world when they could not have turned over the red lion even if they had been willing to do so. "Oh well." He shrugged and plastered an insincere smile on his face as he went to place a call to the red lion to gloat.

He did not have the chance before Cossack hailed him. "What is it?" Lotor demanded irritably. "It better be good! The red lion just showed up, and I want to have words with that space explorer before I annihilate him."

“Oh, in that case I won’t keep you, Sire,” Cossack replied with an equally enthusiastic grin. “But it is good news. On his way to your ship as a prisoner is the yellow lion pilot Hunk. Some of my men took him right after they shot Prince Shorty in the courtyard.”

Lotor’s eyes lit up. That was a worthwhile interruption; Hunk as a prisoner was quite a prize. He did not bother to ponder what Allura would think of that; he would deal with her later. His grudge with Pollux and the Voltron Force was a personal score and it would be settled on his terms. Allura could be placated after it was all said and done. After all, it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission, especially when Lotor was not the type to ask permission of anyone, even his beloved wife.

“Is Bandor dead?”

“I dunno. I guess so. He hasn’t gotten up and shot off his mouth, but all his limbs are still attached so even if he is alive, he probably won’t be for long.”

“And Romelle? Sven? What about Keith?”

“Haven’t come across them yet,” Cossack replied. “My men are searching. We’ve got a bunch of prisoners that I haven’t sorted yet, so they might be in there if they weren’t smart enough to recognize ‘em.”

Lotor’s eyes narrowed determinedly. “Take them alive if you can. I want them as trophies—living trophies. Allura will be difficult if they’re dead.”

Cossack nodded. “Sure thing. They might’ve bought it in one of the cave-ins though. The place is mostly rubble now.”

“It’ll *all* be rubble by the time we’re done with it,” Lotor asserted with savage authority. “Have the ground troops round up who they can, get back to your ship, and let the robeast finish down there. We have a lion to catch.”

“Right away, Sire!”

With that the connection cut off, and Lotor wasted no time in switching channels to the red lion. “Lance,” he greeted in a mock welcoming tone. “So glad you and the red lion could come out to play.”

The angry face of Lance appeared on Lotor’s screen. “I’m not playing, Lotor, except to make you lose.” He then fired several missiles directly at Lotor’s ship. Through the shields the damage they caused was largely cosmetic and did little to inhibit the ship’s function. The robots manning the defenses did not need to be told to return fire, which they did while Lotor transmitted his response to Lance.

“Well then, if you won’t play with me, you’ll have to play with my friend down there if you won’t surrender quietly.” He then paused and said with an insincerely polite demeanor, “Will you turn the lion over that belongs to your friend the princess like a good boy?”

Navigating his way around the barrage of laser fire headed at him from Lotor’s ship, Lance’s response was a heated “Turn this!” To accentuate his point, he had the red lion let loose a hot spray of lava breath onto the battleship.

That time the damage Lance dished out was a bit more than cosmetic, and several alarms blared through the bridge of Lotor’s ship. “I see you won’t handle this like a civilized adult,” Lotor seethed. “So you can play with a beast like your stolen lion.” He keyed up another channel to convey an order directly to the robeast. “Robeast, attack!”

Immediately the robeast’s attention shifted from the fallen Castle Pollux to the red lion, and it launched into the air toward Lance’s ship with an unearthly screech. Lotor ordered the soldiers on his ship as well as the ones on Cossack’s to finish what they started and level the castle

below. There was not much of it left, and Lotor received word a few moments later that the Polluxians who were to be taken as slaves were already aboard the battleships.

The prince of Doom let out a smug chuckle as he surveyed the scene. It was only a matter of time before the last bit of resistance and final remaining rebellious piece of Voltron was in his hands once and for all.

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In the red lion, Lance was both angry and growing increasingly fearful. He was aware of the devastation taking place on the ground below, but with the robeast's attention on him there was nothing he could do to help his friends there. It was all he could do to fight the vicious creature off and keep himself alive and the red lion from either being captured or destroyed.

He had already made the grim resolution to himself that if it came to it, he would have to allow the lion to be destroyed rather than acquired. It crushed him to think of another piece of Voltron lost in such a way, not to mention the fear and dread regarding his own fate, but it was better than the red lion falling into Lotor's hands to be used to further Doom's bloodthirsty desire for conquest.

The robeast's claw connected with the red lion's torso, sending painful sparks through the cabin that made Lance scream aloud. He managed to blast the robeast off of the lion with a burst of fire, but he could tell by the way the controls responded that it would be a close fight—and that was only if Lotor's battleships did not decide to "help" their pet finish the job.

He reached down and patted his rabbit's foot. "C'mon, where's that luck you're supposed to bring me?"

Since he had not really expected an answer, Lance's jaw dropped when his radio crackled to life with a familiar and very welcome voice.

“Lance!”

“Keith!” he exclaimed. “What are—?”

“We’ve got your back,” his friend’s voice responded, and when Lance checked his console he saw that Keith was indeed there—not in the black lion, but in a heavily armed Galaxy Alliance ship, one that had come with plenty of friends. They opened fire on the robeast and Lotor’s fleet.

Once he caught his breath and his heart resumed beating at a semi-normal pace, a wide grin spread across Lance’s face. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you...”

“Gladder than Lotor, I bet,” Keith answered in the same tone he had always used when they interacted in battle in the lions.

The reminder of more pleasant times was bittersweet, but regardless Lance was glad to have Keith fighting at his side, and he replied in much the same way he might have had it been the two of them taking on Lotor in the black and red lions together. “Let’s make him even less glad.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

* * *

Lotor was indeed not pleased, and neither were Cossack or any of the other Doom soldiers participating in the invasion. The prince seethed in wordless rage at the sudden appearance of such a large envoy of Galaxy Alliance ships on the horizon, while Cossack found some appropriate words and broadcast them direct to Lotor’s ship. “Where the fuck did they come from?” his irate voice blared over the ultrawave.

“Galaxy Garrison, Commander Cossack,” some robot in the background responded, one that Cossack declared would be renamed Captain Obvious if it was repairable after the damage it took from the commander’s electrolash after it gave its reply.

“It would seem that they got out a call for help.” Lotor’s voice was deathly calm, although the livid expression on his face indicated that he was anything but, especially as his ship and the rest of Lotor’s fleet began to take heavy fire from the newly arrived reinforcements.

The prince’s eyes narrowed further as Cossack’s battleship exchanged fire with two ships surrounding it, and then as he surveyed the status of his own ship in its fight with the others that had flanked it. It made Lotor furious to realize that with the Galaxy Alliance reinforcements, he was now at the tactical disadvantage and it would only be a matter of time before he had to retreat. That meant leaving the red lion—still with its paws full with the robeast—behind and returning home without it.

Another loud string of curses from Cossack came over the ultrawave. “Sire, any suggestions? We’re getting our asses reamed and our shields are only gonna hold for another minute or two.” He muttered something else, and then a brilliant blast lit up the screen as one of the Alliance ships burst into flame. “Well at least I got one of those damn GA ships.”

The scowl on Lotor’s face deepened, giving him a truly demonic and evil look. The tide of battle had turned and he loathed running from the likes of the Galaxy Alliance, especially when it meant leaving the prize he had come for behind. Granted, it was not a total waste—Castle Pollux was destroyed, he had at least one member of the Voltron Force as a prisoner, and Bandor and Romelle were more than likely dead or at the very least, had lost most everything they held dear. The red lion could be coaxed out again, and Lotor vowed that when that happened he would have a better plan in place for it.

“Return to Doom,” the bitter and angry Lotor ordered. “I think we made our point well enough.” Cossack acknowledged the command and conveyed the order to withdraw, and Lotor sent a transmission to the Galaxy Alliance ships and red lion in parting.

“Consider what happened to Castle Pollux a warning to anyone who presumes to steal the rightful property of planet Arus, planet Doom, and the Drule Empire. The red lion belongs to my

wife, Princess Allura, and I *will* see to it that she gets it, one way or another. It's up to you whether that's in a peaceful relinquishment, or in pieces stained with your blood. Prince Bandor and his friends learned that lesson the hard way. You'll be next if you continue to thwart me. Don't break your dear princess' heart, Lance, by making me kill you too." The prince's yellow eyes were bright with cruel and vengeful intent. "Or your friend Hunk, who I assure you is still alive... and on my ship. For now."

Lotor paused to allow the implicit threat to sink in and to savor the anguish he knew his enemies would feel when they heard that before he finished. "If my robeast doesn't kill you first, you have forty eight hours to abandon the red lion and see to it that the key gets to Allura. If not... well then, I'm quite sorry for your friend."

With that, Lotor's ship withdrew from Pollux's atmosphere and vanished into the darkness of space.

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Lance and Keith were not able to do more than listen to Lotor's ominous gloating as they fought the robeast that the Doom forces had left behind. The fight was brutal and the creature was both vicious and hardy. Without Voltron and his blazing sword, which Lance realized he had become entirely too used to having as a Plan B when a fight got intense, taking on a robeast was no easy task.

The scuffle lasted what felt like an eternity, even though it was really only a matter of minutes, before the combined strength of the red lion and the Galaxy Alliance ships put the deadly creature down for good. When the robeast breathed its last and the dust settled, no more lives had been lost, but some of the Galaxy Alliance ships looked quite a bit worse for the wear. The red lion was not in top shape any longer either, but it was still in passable condition and Lance was not too worried about it, at least not as far as its spaceworthiness or combat durability went.

The damage that Castle Pollux had taken that Lance saw when he disembarked, however, was a different story, and it gave him a terrible nauseous feeling in his stomach to witness firsthand. He had witnessed the destruction Doom left in its wake many times, but it never got any easier to see, especially knowing that this time it was his friends that had suffered. Lance had no words

for what he felt as he traversed the obliterated courtyard, thinking about Hunk, Sven, Romelle, and Bandor, and the role Allura had in it all as Lotor's willing wife.

"My god..." Keith's somber voice interrupted Lance's thoughts. The red lion pilot turned and saw his friend approaching with a Galaxy Alliance captain at his side.

"It's worse than it looked on the ship," the officer said in a grim tone.

"It always is," Lance replied sourly.

"This is Captain Niyte," Keith offered in introduction. "When I got back to Galaxy Garrison I told them everything we knew, and they figured, like I did, that Lotor would be back before long."

Lance nodded to the captain, and then looked at Keith curiously. "I thought you didn't want to be involved in this anymore."

Keith let out a sigh. "I don't. But once we got confirmation that Lotor had ships headed out here, there wasn't any time to waste."

"I wanted him along because of his experience dealing with Doom and what he knows particularly about this situation," Niyte explained.

"It made sense for me to come," Keith agreed with a nod. "And I had to see for myself that everyone was okay."

Lance closed his eyes and made a fist. "Yeah well, they're not."

“I know... Hunk,” Keith sighed. “And we’ve got to hope we find Sven, Romelle, and Bandor here and not with him. Or worse.”

“Don’t even say—” Lance started, but a scouting Galaxy Alliance soldier provided some welcome interruption with an announcement to the captain that cut him off.

“Sir! We found some survivors, and Prince Bandor.”

“Is he alive?” Keith asked the soldier, his dark eyes lighting up with hope, hope that was echoed in Lance’s features as well as he also listened for the answer.

The man nodded, and beckoned for them to follow him. They hurried as fast as they could across the rubble to where a medical team had already hoisted Bandor onto a mobile transport. There was an IV in his arm and a heavy blanket over him. “The laser burn cauterized most of the wound, so he didn’t lose too much blood, Sir,” a medic explained to the captain as they approached. “I think he’s got some serious internal injuries though, and he’ll need to be kept in a hospital unit.”

“What do you think his chances are?” Niyte asked.

The medic frowned. “It’s hard to say, Sir. He only regained consciousness twice but for less than a minute. Until we know the full extent of his injuries...”

The captain nodded somberly. “Understood.”

The medics then took Bandor aboard a ship and out of their sight, and while the crew tended to some other survivors, Lance asked, “What about Princess Romelle? And Sven?”

“Nobody’s seen them yet,” another medic replied.

A nearby soldier volunteered, “We’re still looking though.”

Keith climbed on top of a large piece of rubble to see if he could spot a relatively safe pathway deeper into the castle ruins. “We’ve gotta keep looking,” he said determinedly. “If Sven and Romelle are in there alive, they need our help.”

“Yeah,” Lance agreed, also feeling a renewed sense of urgency, not just for Sven and Romelle but also for someone that no one had addressed directly yet. “What about Hunk? He needs our help too.”

A disturbed frown spread across Keith’s face as he recalled Lotor’s ultimatum. “Yeah.”

Niyte turned and gave both of the Voltron pilots a sympathetic but stern look. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of the Galaxy Alliance’s official position on acquiescing to terroristic demands.”

The officious response lit Lance’s fuse, and anger flashed in his eyes. “Hunk isn’t some statistic.”

Keith leapt down from the rubble and put his hand on Lance’s shoulder in an effort to disarm him. “He didn’t mean it that way, Lance,” he said, and looked at Niyte. “Besides, if the lions do technically belong to Arus, it means they’re Allura’s and if she’s married to Lotor...” His voice caught in his throat as he said the last part; the notion was still hard for him to accept and sounded crazy when spoken, even though it was reality.

“Arus is still technically a part of the Galaxy Alliance,” Niyte conceded before adding, “for now, anyway. After this,” he looked around at the wasted landscape that had once been Castle Pollux and its courtyard, “I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s suspended from it unless Princess Allura denies complicity in it and in a show of good faith renounces her marriage to Prince Lotor and severs all political ties to Zarkon’s empire.” He rubbed his chin. “Regardless, regulation stipulates that until we’ve got official notification that Arus *isn’t* a part of the Alliance, the red lion is still subject to being treated as property of a Galaxy Alliance world and can’t be turned over to an adversarial force in response to a threat.” His brow furrowed as he further pondered the contradictory nature of the situation. “Even if we turn it over to its legitimate owner, and especially not if she’s party to the invasion of a fellow Alliance world.”

That time it was Keith’s turn to frown. “There’s no way Allura was party to *this*. No way. This was all Lotor’s doing.”

Lance remained uncharacteristically quiet. Like Keith, he did not believe that Allura would have condoned what had just happened on Pollux, but as close to Lotor as she now was, he found it hard to see her hands as being entirely clean of the blood that had been shed, even if it was unwittingly. “So what *do* we do with the lion? I can’t just turn it over to Lotor.” He took a deep breath to steady himself and keep the raw emotion churning inside him from pouring out. “But Hunk...”

“We’ll find a way to get Hunk,” Keith said. “Allura would never let Lotor hurt him.”

“How’s she gonna stop him?” Lance suddenly exploded, shouting at Keith. “She didn’t stop him from doing this!” He waved wildly toward the destroyed castle. “She has no control over him! You really think she’ll be able keep him from killing Hunk?” He kicked a rock at his feet with enough force to send it skittering far across the courtyard. “Then you’re just as fucking naïve as she is.”

Keith let out a frustrated groan. “What do you propose we do then? Take off in the lion again? That’s been your sure-fire solution to everything so far.”

“Yeah well, I bet if I went to Doom in the red lion I’d have a better shot of getting Hunk out of there than you and the Galaxy Alliance debating about laws and Lotor’s intentions all day!”

Niyte took personal umbrage to Lance's accusation toward the Galaxy Alliance and its bureaucratic nature. "We act on the behalf of the greater good for everyone in the Alliance."

"Don't do anything stupid, Lance!" Keith warned. "We've lost enough from rash actions lately. If you go to Doom half-cocked you're likely to get yourself killed or land yourself right beside Hunk, and Lotor'll get the red lion anyway. Is that what you want?"

"You don't think doing nothing is stupid too?"

"Of course we've got to do something!" the exasperated Keith replied. "But how about first taking care of our friends right here, right now, who need us? Hunk isn't the only one to think about. Sven and Romelle also need our help!"

Keith's rational words bit into Lance's anger just enough to give him pause. "Okay," he conceded. "How about this then? You and Captain Niyte stay here and look for Sven and Romelle, and help the people of Pollux. I'll take the red lion and split." He held up a hand before Keith could protest, even as the former black lion pilot drew breath to do so. "I promise I won't fly to Doom solo on a mission to get Hunk. I swear. I'll find some of our friends... some who aren't so military, who don't have to do so much 'by the book'. Stride, Joran, Omnia, Marianne, people like that with resources and the means to help."

"All right," Keith agreed, albeit with some hesitation. "You'll keep in contact?"

Lance nodded. "With a low profile, but yeah."

Niyte raised an eyebrow at the exchange, but did not challenge the notion. "Officially, I never heard that," he told them in a low tone that would not attract attention from anyone else. "Far as I know, you two came to an agreement to seek aid through alternative channels while I was with my men looking for survivors."

At that Lance gave a wan smile. “Glad you weren’t here then, Captain.”

“Happy to not help,” he quipped in response.

Keith put his hand on Lance’s shoulder. “Good luck.”

Lance returned the gesture, and his friend’s warm look. “You too.”

* * *

The news of what had happened on Pollux did not reach Arus until several hours after the battle. Princess Allura and Haggar had arrived on Allura’s home world uneventfully and received a peaceful, albeit awkward, reception from the Castle of Lions staff. Her attendants and guards treated her cordially, and watched Haggar with wary eyes, but no one dared to insult the witch or protest her presence. High Admiral Threen did not bother leaving his ship when they arrived, and stayed only long enough to deploy the soldiers he had been ordered to leave behind as guards and escorts for Haggar and Allura.

The tension and silent animosity that had filled the atmosphere when Allura, Haggar, Coran, Nanny, and Pidge all assembled in the control room had been excruciating, however, and the princess had been very relieved when Haggar excused herself to “see to Zarkon’s orders” pertaining to the robot soldiers stationed outside. When the old witch returned, she had immediately asked to be shown to whatever guest quarters she was to be given, and that was the only interaction they had with her.

Nanny had showered Allura with hugs and bemoaned the danger “that beast” that she had married placed her in, referring to the ill-fated trip to Pollux she and Lotor had taken prior to her leaving Doom, and once she had calmed down, Pidge and Coran had asked Allura to tell them what had happened. They had been understandably upset at Bandor’s reaction of opening fire on Allura and Lotor’s ship, although Coran pointed out that it should not have been entirely

unexpected while Pidge defended his friends and staunchly refuted Coran's disapproving implication that Lance was a thief.

That conversation, on top of everything else Allura had dealt with since she had left for Pollux with Lotor, had drained Allura's mental and emotional reserves, and as a result she had asked that they postpone further discussion of it until they met for dinner. She had then excused herself for a much-needed solitary rest.

Her sleep, somewhat fitful as it had been, still did her some good and she awakened with a clear head and a renewed resolve to make the best of the situation no matter what happened. Although it made her heart ache know that Bandor and Romelle—and presumably Keith, Hunk, Sven, and especially Lance if he would not return the lion—were angry and perhaps even hated her for choosing to marry Lotor, she still clung to the hope that somehow she could make them understand and maybe even regain their friendship in time.

Little did she know what a challenge that would turn out to be.

"Princess," Coran greeted Allura somberly as she walked into the control room. The news of Lotor's retaliatory strike on Pollux had finally reached Arus, and it fell upon Coran's shoulders to break it to the princess. "We need to talk. I'm afraid I have some very bad news."

Allura's heart sank when she saw her guardian's expression, and when she noticed Pidge sitting in one of the swivel chairs with reddened eyes that appeared to have been recently crying. "What happened?" She went to Pidge's side and looked to Coran, alarmed. "Pidge? Coran?"

"Tell her," Haggard's old voice came from the shadows on the other side of the room. Allura had not even realized that Haggard was in the room until then, and she could not tell from the witch's neutral tone whether she was taking silent glee in or truly ambivalent about whatever it was that Coran was supposed to tell her.

The castle caretaker straightened. “Your husband,” he began in a stiffly controlled tone, “fulfilled his word that he would act on your behalf to reclaim the red lion by any means necessary.”

The implication of his words hit her like a thunderbolt, and Allura swallowed and prayed that the reason for Pidge’s tear-stained face was not what first came to mind. “Oh no. Lance isn’t—?”

“Lance is alive,” Coran said, “and so are Keith and Prince Bandor. That’s the good news.” His frown etched deeper. “The *only* good news. I can’t say the same for Princess Romelle or Sven, who are missing, presumed either captured by Doom’s forces or possibly dead in the rubble of Castle Pollux, or Hunk, whom Lotor claims has been taken captive by his soldiers as a hostage.”

“Lotor captured Hunk?” Allura repeated in disbelief. “And ‘rubble’... are you saying he destroyed Castle Pollux?”

“Yeah,” Pidge said miserably, looking up at Allura with what she could only describe as an awful expression—a combination of grief, anger, hurt, and worry all together.

“But he said he wouldn’t hurt...”

Haggar fixed her unyielding stare on the princess. “Prince Lotor said he would try not to hurt anyone innocent. Castle Pollux isn’t a civilian target.”

Allura’s eyes clouded with tears, both for her friends and at the sting of betrayal, for she had believed Lotor’s promise to her not to harm those she cared about. “But there were innocent people in the castle. And he was only supposed to ask for the lion back and take it if they fought him.”

“Do you really think they didn’t resist?” Haggar replied incredulously. Although the old witch was not being intentionally cruel or biting—a surprising display of sympathy from someone of Haggar’s emotional makeup—Allura still found her words cold and hollow.

Coran meanwhile frowned in Haggar’s direction. “Naturally they resisted. Any law-abiding Alliance world would, when dealing with threats from the likes of Prince Lotor.”

Haggar let out an unimpressed snort. “Threats to return something that rightfully belongs to him to begin with? How very typical of the Galaxy Alliance.”

“They don’t belong to Lotor!” Pidge snapped at the witch.

“No, they belong to his wife.” She gave Pidge an equally unamused look.

“Please stop.” Allura’s voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, but it still carried an unmistakable air of authority. As everyone fell silent, she turned to Coran. “What else happened? Lotor went there, demanded the lions, and they fought?”

“And he blasted their castle into rubble,” he confirmed succinctly, closing his eyes with renewed sadness. “Once the castle fell, they sent in a ground invasion to capture what survivors they could. Hunk was among them. Lotor gloated as much when he retreated.”

“He retreated? But I thought he won?”

“Not quite,” Haggar corrected. “Your friends on Pollux managed to get out a distress call to the Galaxy Alliance. They showed up with reinforcements after much of the damage was done, but before Lotor’s robeast could overpower the red lion.”

“But before he left, he did say that Hunk would pay the price if Lance didn’t give him the lion within forty eight hours,” Coran interjected with a tone of finality. “And as of yet, he has not done so. He was last seen leaving Pollux and heading deeper into Galaxy Alliance territory in it.”

Allura felt as though she had been dealt a physical blow and took a steadying breath. “No...” She closed her eyes, fighting back tears. How could things have gotten so out of hand that such awful things were happening to her friends? She felt terrible, guilty, and miserable. It was because of her decision to marry Lotor that these things had happened, because she wanted to save him from an unjust fate. Why were those she loved being forced to pay such a price for her decision? It felt so cruel and unfair...

Turning to Haggar, she decided that she had to do whatever it took to try and set things right, since she could not change what had already been done. “Lotor has Hunk, right? He won’t hurt him; he knows how I’d feel about that... he *has* to know.”

Coran’s lips pursed into a tighter frown. “I would think he’d know how attacking Pollux would hurt you as well.”

Haggar let out an exasperated sigh before Allura had the chance to respond. “And it would’ve done so much for Doom’s reputation to let Prince Bandor run wild balking us because Prince Lotor’s wife would get upset. I’m sure the Drule Council would’ve loved that explanation. He explained the reasons for his retaliation on Pollux to Allura. She understands the political necessity of it.” She turned to Allura. “That was why you specified that you didn’t want anyone hurt unnecessarily when you left, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Allura said with a sad nod.

“You were okay with that?” Pidge asked the princess, shocked.

“No! I wasn’t okay with it!” Allura protested. The flash of hurt she saw in Pidge’s eyes was unbearable to her, and tears threatened to spill from hers once more. “I understood why Lotor needed to do it! I never *wanted* him to do it!”

Pidge stood and stared hard at Allura. “Well don’t let him hurt Hunk!” he pleaded, a note of desperation in his voice along with anger. “Make him let him go! Make him do at least that much!”

When she heard that, Haggar let out an incredulous squawk. “You have to be kidding. He’s a political bargaining chip. There’s no way he’ll be released.”

The former green lion pilot glared fiercely at the witch. “He’s our friend!”

“Then I’m sorry he was foolish enough to stay in the line of fire—for the princess’ sake,” she retorted with a roll of her yellow eyes. “Whatever you choose to believe, boy, the universe is not black and white, good and evil, fluffy bunnies and bloodthirsty demons with no middle ground. Given the choice I’m sure Prince Lotor would rather it not be someone Princess Allura cares about that forces his hand on necessary political action. He’s quite in love with the princess. I’d think that much was obvious given how they wound up married.”

Allura gave Haggar an imploring look. “Hunk can’t be harmed! We can stop him from being hurt, can’t we? Where do you think Lotor is now? Let’s try to call him.” She rushed to the console.

Haggar joined the princess’ side. “Lotor will do what he can if you insist, I’m reasonably sure of that. That said,” she continued, looking pointedly into Allura’s less jaded eyes, “it may not be Lotor’s choice. Zarkon and the Drule Council won’t take lightly to Pollux and the Galaxy Alliance balking them not once, but twice, and he’s in no position politically to challenge them at the moment. And I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that looking for sympathy from Zarkon isn’t going to get you far whether you or his son seek it. In your case, asking will probably make him inclined to make it worse.”

The sinking feeling in the pit of Allura’s stomach told her that Haggar was speaking honestly, and while she supposed she should be glad that the witch was actually trying to help, her words were of no comfort. “But I have to do something! Please,” she implored. “Help me reach Lotor! Your magic... you can use it to communicate, right? Please, Haggar!”

The old witch sighed with resignation. “I’m getting too soft in my old age,” she muttered irritably under her breath as she closed her eyes and sought to divine Lotor’s whereabouts. Lotor owed her significantly for all of this, she thought, and she decided that as soon as they were back on Doom, she would insist that Cossack be put on “Arus duty” next time around.

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Continued in Part Three