

Act of War by Cheezey
Part Three

Although not as upset as his wife, Prince Lotor was not in the best of moods back on his home world either. Upon his return, he and Cossack had been summoned to Zarkon's throne room to give a report on their mission. As it stood, the king was not terribly impressed.

"So for all that, you still don't have the red lion?"

"No, Father." Lotor did his best to keep his tone respectful while attempting to hide his exasperation, but the attempt was failing. "The Galaxy Alliance showed up before the robeast could overpower it."

"But we got that yellow lion pilot as a hostage, and Prince Lotor told them—"

"Yes, I know what Lotor said," Zarkon said, sternly cutting off Cossack before he fixed his harsh gaze upon his son once more. "You gave them forty-eight hours to surrender the red lion or else Chunky or whatever his name is gets it."

"I think it's 'Hunk'..."

Zarkon turned sharply toward Cossack and glared at him in a way that made it clear that if the commander knew what was good for him, he would shut up and quit interrupting him with chatter. That time Cossack received the message loud and clear and lowered his head obediently while Zarkon resumed speaking to Lotor. "Well, the clock is ticking and last I heard, the red lion isn't on its way to Arus in a gift box and the Alliance is calling your bluff. Do you have a grand plan for following through, or did you not bother to think that far ahead as usual?"

The prince frowned. "Actually, I thought there was a chance he might do it, since they know how harming her friend would affect Allura. But if not, then unfortunately she'll find out the hard way how little her friends ultimately matter."

"And what's your plan for the punishment?" Zarkon leaned forward and tapped his scepter lightly.

Feeling free to speak once more, Cossack offered his suggestion. "The Pit of Skulls is a nice place for the Voltron Force."

"Indeed," Zarkon agreed, "but that's not going to get the sort of message we need across in this situation." Turning toward Lotor, he narrowed his eyes and addressed him again. "You've made quite a stink with the Galaxy Alliance. You and your pet princess and your little scuffle with Pollux have pretty much single-handedly annihilated any chance of lasting peace between them and the Drule Empire for some time. Their diplomats have taken this whole thing as a slap in the face, and the peace-mongers on the council have been calling me whining about it."

Lotor gave his father an incredulous look. "Do you think I care what the Alliance thinks?"

"Do you think I do either?" Zarkon retorted sarcastically. "There's a reason I hung up on Hazar when he griped at me about you 'undermining his efforts', and Throk is lucky that Merla agreed to deal with him on our behalf or I'd have hung up on him too when he called, the pompous idiot."

When Cossack heard that, his eyebrow rose; he had been wondering why Merla was not there, although he was certainly not complaining about her absence.

Lotor, meanwhile, frowned at his father. "So what are you saying then? That we have to do something to satisfy the Drule Council?"

“Yes. Hazar’s whining aside, the majority of the Drules don’t expect us to take Pollux’s thievery of the red lion lying down, and it goes without saying that *I* don’t either.” There was a savage gleam in the king’s eyes as he spoke. “Laying waste to the castle was a good start, but we need to follow through and send the message loud and clear that any world that presumes to get one over on King Zarkon or planet Doom is going to get what’s coming to them. I want Pollux conquered, its people subservient to us, and the world itself forcibly taken from Alliance control and put in ours. That’s long-term. For the short term,” he twirled his scepter before he pointed it down in Lotor’s direction, “you can start by executing the yellow lion pilot in a very public spectacle, broadcast in full gory detail to Galaxy Garrison, when the red lion isn’t turned over as I expect it won’t be.”

Lotor stood and nodded back at him. “Yes, Father.”

At that time Cossack also stood, casting Lotor a curious sidelong glance as he did so, wondering how he was going to explain *that* one to Allura. Being a newlywed himself, Cossack was no expert on marital affairs, but given that his own wife had recently read him the riot act for merely suggesting something that tripped an emotional wire, he had a feeling that his prince was in for a long stay on the royal couch if he let Hunk meet such a fate.

“Cossack.”

The commander faced Lotor when he addressed him. “Yes Sire?”

“I want you to send armed scout ships to Pollux immediately to assess the level of Galaxy Alliance presence still there. If they aren’t outgunned, I want them to land and round up any surviving members of the Polluxian royalty and their court.”

Cossack nodded. “Sure.”

“And you’ll deal with the yellow lion pilot swiftly and accordingly, Lotor?” Zarkon interjected. “I want to be there when it happens, and see his blood spilled myself.”

“Of course, Father. You’ll have a front row seat.”

The stern look on Zarkon’s face gave way to a sadistic grin that lit up his scaly face and bared his fangs. “Excellent! It’ll be a treat to watch one of the Voltron Force dealt with once and for all.” He settled back into his throne, relaxed. “You two are dismissed.”

Lotor and Cossack each bowed, and exited the throne room together. Once they were out alone in the hall, Cossack could contain his curiosity no longer, and asked the question that had been burning ever since the issue had been raised in Zarkon’s audience. “Uh, Prince Lotor?”

“What?”

“You know that Princess Allura is going to freak out if you kill her Voltron Force pal, right?”

“Yes,” Lotor replied testily.

Cossack frowned. “I mean she’s really going to have a fit, not just get a little mad and just sulk for a while like chicks tend to. Yeah, I know she’s pretty forgiving and all, but if she wouldn’t even let me shoot at her pals back when you first brought her here—”

“She’s *my* wife,” Lotor snapped, giving Cossack a sharp glare as he did so. “I think I know her a little better than you do.”

“Then with all due respect, Prince Lotor, how’re you gonna handle this?” Cossack asked. “I don’t think King Zarkon’s going to back down about the execution thing.”

Lotor continued down the dark corridor of the castle, seemingly unconcerned. “Lance still has time to turn over the red lion. If he does, then there won’t be a need for the bloody spectacle. He’ll remain unharmed, as I promised Allura.”

Cossack kept pace beside him. “Uh-huh. And if he doesn’t?”

“Then we go with a contingency plan.”

“Oh.” The commander relaxed somewhat, relieved to hear that Lotor had already thought of a way to resolve the issue. Although Cossack did not particularly care about Princess Allura’s goody-two-shoes feelings, he did care about the effect her mood swings as Lotor’s wife had upon him, both as Lotor’s friend and more importantly because Lotor was the guy who gave him orders, orders that tended to get crazy when she was involved. “So what’s the contingency plan?”

“We find a look-alike substitute among the prisoners or slaves and kill him in Hunk’s place. Father will never know; he’ll get his bloody execution show and the Drule Council will be satisfied. Allura will be told in confidence what really happened and be assured that her friend is alive safe and sound far away from this ‘evil’ place,” Lotor explained, speaking as if the answer was quite simple and there was no flaw whatsoever in his brilliant thinking.

Cossack considered the logistics of Lotor’s plan. “That could work. From a distance, any chunky human guy about that size with that coloring could be made to look like him without too much trouble.” He gave Lotor an inquisitive look as he pondered it further. “So where are we gonna stick the real thing so that your father won’t find him and the word won’t get out? It’ll be hard to keep him under wraps that way. If we gotta minimize security leaks, it’ll be easier for him to get away and blab to everyone in the GA that it was all a scam. And if that happens King Zarkon will be *really* pissed.”

“That’s for you to figure out,” Lotor informed Cossack. “I’m leaving the disposal and security of our dirty little Voltron Force secret up to you.”

The commander stopped dead in his tracks, wide-eyed in shock. “What?”

“You heard me. I’m entrusting you to take care of it. I’m sure you can find somewhere to stash him where you can keep your eye on him and make sure he doesn’t get out and run his mouth, but also won’t be harmed as per Allura’s wishes.” Lotor smirked. “Consider it your reward for your service and loyalty to me when I can’t trust anyone else with vipers like Merla around this place. One of our most loathed enemies, a member of the Voltron Force, will be your personal slave.”

Cossack’s mind reeled at the potential implications of what he was being asked to do. “Thanks, Prince Lotor,” he said, and then added, “Really I mean that, it’s a great trophy. Well, except that I can’t let anyone know, since people would recognize him... but what if he runs his mouth?” He frowned. “Sure, I know if he’s my slave I can always beat him to keep him in line, but do you think Princess Allura would count me cutting his tongue out to keep him quiet ‘unharm’d’? And how’ll I explain the similarity in looks or where he came from? If he’s my slave, King Zarkon or Haggar at least are gonna see him. Not to mention Merla’s mind-reading thing... she’ll figure out who he is fast.”

An impatient edge crept into Lotor’s voice. “You’re resourceful, Cossack. I’m sure you can think of something. Take him to your home. There are slaves at the Tonorm’oith estate, aren’t there? It’s up in the mountains, hard to flee on foot, and I imagine it wouldn’t be too hard to force the other slaves to keep an eye on him or stress the importance of such a situation to your wife.” Lotor looked down at the commander haughtily. “You two should be honored to be entrusted with such a secret from the royalty.”

“Oh I *am* honored, Sire!” Cossack assured Lotor, and then sighed as he began to explain his position. “But there’s no way in the gods’ galaxy that I can take a member of the Voltron Force for ‘safe-keeping’ at Kuryaki’s estate. No way.” Cossack shook his head vehemently. “She hates Voltron and everything related to him; the whole ‘he-killed-my-baby’ thing with her precious Yurak. I got a colder shoulder than the iciest frost planet in the galaxy for just volunteering her for the Arus rebuilding project because of that. Hunk’d be safer in a robeast pen than with her... and frankly so would I if I suggested it.”

Lotor folded his arms across his chest and glowered down at Cossack, irritated to be meeting resistance over something that was, to him, utterly trivial. “I don’t care about your domestic squabbles. I gave you an order and I expect you to follow it! Find the substitute and see to it that

Allura's friend is kept safe, unharmed, and secret. I don't care how you do it, just make sure you do! Am I making myself clear?"

Cossack could tell that any further protest would only result in the prince sending him to the robeast pen instead of his wife doing so, so he simply gave a resigned nod. "Crystal, Sire." He looked down the hall glumly. "I'll think of something."

"Good." Lotor's mood, on the other hand, improved considerably with Cossack's compliance. "I knew I could count on you." He resumed walking down the hall.

The commander followed and fell in step beside him. "Course you can." A frown crept across his features as he tried to figure out a way to handle the task that had been posed to him. "But I gotta say you owe me one for this."

Lotor flashed him an incredulous look. "I owe *you*? You're lucky I like you, Cossack," he said dryly. "I wouldn't tolerate that kind of presumptuousness from just anyone."

"Sorry Sire," Cossack replied flatly. "It's just not gonna be easy to pull off."

"Oh quit your whining!" Lotor snapped, his patience worn almost to its limit. "Look, I'll give you a few days off after this is all settled before I send you back to deal with Pollux if you just shut up and take care of it! If you don't, I'll set Hunk free myself, tell Father that you did it, and let you deal with *him* instead!"

"Okay, okay!" It was clear that Cossack was still not thrilled, but he knew better than to test Lotor's limits farther, and the promise of some rest and relaxation in the near future for his trouble was motivation to do as his liege asked. "I won't bring it up again," he assured Lotor. "Mum's the word! I'll just get it done, nice and easy, and quit talking about it! No problem!"

Lotor's brow rose. "Cossack."

“Yes Prince Lotor?”

“You’re still talking.”

A sheepish smile crept across the commander’s face. “Shutting up, Sire.”

* * *

There were less than twenty-four hours left before Lotor’s ultimatum deadline when the red lion landed on the quiet and remote world of Caspia. A camouflaged hangar door had opened to receive him once he had entered the planet’s airspace; those in charge of the base that lay beneath the ground had been expecting his arrival.

“Welcome, Lance,” the scientist Marianne greeted him in a friendly manner as he disembarked.

“Thanks,” he replied warmly, an uneasy feeling settling over him as he walked over to meet her. It was not that he was uncomfortable with Marianne herself or anyone that worked in the underground laboratory with her, they were all his allies, but rather it was the memories of his last visit to Caspia that nagged at him. Although that had involved a scuffle with Doom and a nasty battle with robots that Marianne herself had refused to help them with due to her personal and rather vehement dislike of violence, all of that had since been resolved and Lance held no grudges over any of it. What soured his mood about that place in particular was the reminder that the last time he had been there, it had been as part of a team of friends that he loved and trusted without question—a team that had since been shattered apart and friends he felt like had lost forever.

Lance did his best shove the painful nostalgia to the back of his mind and forced a smile. “I really appreciate you helping me out. I knew if anyone could fix up a couple of battle scars on the red lion quick and get it ready for a rescue mission, it’d be you.”

“I wish we didn’t have to keep perpetuating this war,” Marianne said with a rueful smile. “But you and your friends have done a lot for the people of the galaxy.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “And I’m so sorry for your friends on Pollux. They’re in my prayers, as is your friend Hunk. He was such a kind-hearted fellow.”

“He still is, if we can get him away from those Doom creeps in time.” Lance looked up urgently at his lion. “You think you can get this cat souped up fast enough for me to get to Doom before Lotor makes good on his threat?”

Marianne pushed her long auburn ponytail over her shoulder and gave the lion an evaluating once-over. “I think so. It doesn’t look it was damaged too badly; probably just needs some patching. Me and my assistants and my tech robots—they’re very efficient—we’ll get to work on it right away.”

Lance flashed her a grateful smile. “Great! I owe you one.” He stepped back and took a look around the bay while Marianne examined the red lion. He noticed another impressive fighting ship farther down the hold, one he had seen before not long after the first time he had been on Caspia, a dark grey and black winged fighter ship with a felinoid shape.

“Hey!” he exclaimed in surprise. “Is that who I think it is?”

Rising briefly from where she had been kneeling by the base of the red lion’s tail, Marianne answered, “Yes. Stride made it here a few hours ago. Your friend Keith used some connections at Galaxy Garrison to find out where he was and got the message to him to get in touch with Omnia on Zaul.”

“Yeah, I talked to Joran last night and he was the one who told me that it’d be safe to head here and that you’d be around. Right before I talked to you, actually.”

“Omnia passed the word on to him that you needed help with a rescue mission,” Marianne explained. “Stride is still quite disgusted with Zarkon—not that I can blame him—so he was glad to help you and your friends.”

“Where is he?” Lance asked. He figured that the less he talked about his intentions on Doom in front of Marianne, the better. Although he knew that she understood that in this situation violence was a necessary evil, he also did not want to go on about it in front of her out of respect to her beliefs, especially when he knew that she had to feel conflicted about fixing a craft that was essentially a war machine. That and time was tight, so the less distraction he gave the scientist, the more time she would have to work on the red lion.

She pointed to a stairwell on the north end of the hangar. “Head up that way and you’ll probably find him in one of the rooms on the far end toward the left. There’s a kitchen and lounge there. He asked for something to eat a while ago. Help yourself while you’re there if you want, and feel free to sleep too if you need to. We’ll be working down here a few hours at least.”

“Thanks. Catch you later!” Lance called out and headed up the stairs. Marianne gave him a brief wave in parting before she returned her attention to the red lion.

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Lotor had only been back in his quarters for about a minute when he noticed that the crystal on a pedestal in the corner—a private magical communication port that was in each of the royal quarters for Haggar to use to speak with them—was aglow, signifying that the old witch was trying to contact him. Knowing that she was with Allura, that was Lotor’s immediate concern, and he was relieved that when he looked into the orb he saw both of their faces there, Allura’s somewhat distraught, but otherwise fine.

“Allura, Haggar... I see you made it to Arus safely. I’m glad.”

“Lotor! We just heard about Pollux!” Allura exclaimed. “What happened?” She paused and added in a softened tone, “I see you’re all right at least... but why did you do what you did to Castle Pollux? And Hunk? Where is Hunk? Is he safe?”

Lotor could not hide his disappointment at Allura’s reaction, although on some level he had expected something like it, especially knowing that those in the Castle of Lions save Haggar had undoubtedly painted his role in the most unflattering light possible out of spite. Lotor had been dreading the inevitable explanation of what had happened on Pollux to Allura, and while he did take it as promising that she had at least acknowledged his well-being, the part of him that craved her full and undivided love wished that Allura had placed more emphasis on that than on her miserable friends. Still, Lotor supposed it was better than her turning against him altogether, and he remained confident that her priorities would sort appropriately to him in time. “Your friend is alive,” Lotor assured Allura. “He resisted capture and was wounded in the leg, but I had our medical team tend to him.” That was the truth; he had ordered Hunk’s wounds treated since his intent was to keep the yellow lion pilot alive for Allura’s sake. Such displays of mercy went against Lotor’s grain, but it was for Allura, tangible proof for her to see just how much he loved her, so he did it anyway.

Allura leaned closer to the crystal. “Coran said that you told everyone you were going to kill Hunk if Lance didn’t turn the red lion over. Please promise me you won’t do that, even if he doesn’t! Promise me, Lotor!” She was pleading, although there was a fierce note of demand in that plea, and the look in her watery eyes when she spoke made it clear to Lotor that if he disregarded it, any love she had for him in her heart would die on the spot.

“I’m doing what I can, Allura,” Lotor told her earnestly. He hoped she would understand how much he was indeed doing for her benefit, for her love, and the efforts he was going through to keep her pilot friend alive. There was certainly no one else in the universe that he would go to such lengths for, other than himself.

Haggar then chose to speak up. “You know that Zarkon will expect you to keep your word.”

“*Promise me, Lotor,*” Allura emphasized from beside the witch.

“I won’t harm your friend. I promise,” Lotor told Allura, and then added, “but I can’t just let him go. It’s a political issue now. As a fellow ruler, you know that such matters aren’t cut and dried. I can promise you that he won’t be harmed, but that’s it.”

“Hmm, I wonder what Zarkon will think of your promise,” Haggar mused, and fixed her yellow eyes on Lotor in such a piercing stare that even through the crystal and the distance of space it made him wince.

Both her look and her tone irritated Lotor. “If you know what’s good for you, old witch, you’ll stay out of it! I’ll keep things sorted out with my father and for the good of the empire. That’s not your job.” His tone was heavy with implicit threat.

Haggar in turn was not impressed with the prince’s snide reply. “Let me guess,” she said sarcastically. “You’ve got some sort of elaborate ruse and deception planned to pull the wool over your father’s and Merla’s and the whole Drule Empire and Galaxy Alliances’ eyes to save face with them and keep your wife happy at the same time.” She made a disgusted face. “You’re so predictable and arrogant, taking the same chances over and over again, and for what? Love? Fool.” She turned briefly to Allura. “No offense meant to you personally of course, Princess.”

Allura did not have the chance to indicate whether she took offense or not before Lotor fired back an angry retort to the old witch, who had clearly struck a nerve. “I’m not going to warn you again! Stay out of it, Haggar!”

Haggar’s cracked lips parted into a sneer, showing the tips of her fangs. “Hah. I wouldn’t touch this mess with a ten-foot magic staff. By all means, play your little game. I won’t say a word to Zarkon. It’ll be amusing to see how long you can pull it off. Just don’t come crying to me when it blows up in your face.”

When Haggar fell silent, Allura spoke up again, looking at Lotor in a way that got to him on nearly every level possible. “Lotor, you promise that you won’t hurt Hunk no matter what?”

Looking back through the crystal at her lovely face, so distraught, Lotor wished that he was with her in person to caress it and allay her fears with softly spoken words and warm, passionate kisses. "I promise," he reiterated.

It seemed that she believed in his sincerity that time, and her face softened to its more natural, gentle look. "Thank you," Allura said softly. "I'll talk more with you when you get back. Then you can tell me yourself what happened on Pollux... and why."

Although Lotor was sure that conversation would not be pleasant one either, he still felt his desire to return to Arus resurge in spades. In person he could explain everything to Allura so much better, alone and without a heckling, bitter old witch or nosy busybodies from the Castle of Lions interrupting with their unsolicited opinions. He imagined a fond reunion with Allura in the privacy of their bedchamber where he would tell her his account, make her truly understand as he did *why* Pollux deserved all that they had gotten, and why the Voltron Force was a part of her life best left behind when her future was with him. He envisioned her sweet face before him, eyes shining with understanding as it finished, and making love to her afterward with vigor as he had on their wedding night. "I'll return as soon as I can," he said after a long moment of indulging in the fantasy. "I love you, Allura."

She smiled back at him, a wan smile, but one that Lotor still believed held genuine love for him that she would soon be able to not only acknowledge, but embrace as he did. "I'll see you soon, Lotor."

The image then faded from the crystal, the call over, but Lotor remained beside the orb for several moments after the glow within it died down. The time to return to Arus could not come soon enough for his liking.

Before he could do that, however, there were still things to be done. The deadline he had imposed for the red lion to be turned over was fast approaching. Withdrawing his hand from the crystal's surface, Lotor turned abruptly and went to see to it that those things were taken care of as efficiently as possible.

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When Allura and Haggar rejoined Pidge and Coran after speaking with Lotor they were met with expectant looks. “So what did he say?” Pidge asked as they approached.

“I trust he gave you very good reason for his brutal invasion of Pollux?” Coran added, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in his tone.

Allura frowned. “I asked him to explain that to me in person. He can tell me about what’s already done and over with then, when I can see his face up close and tell whether he’s telling me the truth.”

Pidge let out an incredulous snort. “I got an easy way to tell if Lotor’s lying: his lips are moving.”

Despite its source, Pidge’s remark inspired a poorly stifled cackle from Haggar, but Coran did not acknowledge either and remained dour as ever. Allura’s frown, meanwhile, deepened. “I know his track record, but I do believe him when he says he doesn’t want to hurt me. There is another side to Lotor. I’ve seen it. I believe he loves me in the way that he can.”

Coran shook his head and let out a beleaguered sigh. “Tell me then, Allura, why does he continually hurt you?”

“It’s not that simple, Coran.”

“His ‘love’ also doesn’t excuse him invading Pollux against your wishes, what he’s done to this world—”

“We’re going to rebuild Arus, Coran!” Allura, now growing angry and defensive, asserted. “The war’s over now. We’ve already got plans in place and funding from people in the Drule Empire that’ll help our people and rebuild things that were destroyed in the war. We’ve been over this!”

“And what about what he did on Pollux? To Prince Bandor, Princess Romelle, Sven?” Coran countered. “Not to mention the Voltron Force?”

“What *did* he say about Hunk, Princess?” Pidge interjected.

Glad that Pidge had provided the perfect opening to derail an argument with Coran, Allura turned toward her young friend to answer. “He promised me that Hunk wouldn’t be hurt. I made him specifically promise, and made it very clear exactly what I meant. I think he really meant it when he said he wouldn’t allow Hunk to be harmed.”

Pidge blinked. “He promised.” He was not exactly challenging Allura’s statement, but it was clear that he was not convinced by it either.

Coran, however, was more overtly skeptical. “Do you really think that when the red lion isn’t turned over, that he’ll keep that promise? As Haggar herself pointed out earlier,” he gestured to the witch, “he’s become a political pawn. A ruthless organization like the Drule Empire isn’t going to allow a perceived weakness by not carrying out such a threat once it’s been made.”

“Oh don’t worry, Lotor has a *plan*,” Haggar chimed in with sarcasm of her own.

Looking from Haggar to Allura, Pidge asked, “A plan?”

“I think he’s going to do something to make it look like Hunk was,” Allura winced slightly, unable to bring herself to speak of Hunk’s intended fate in more explicit detail, “dealt with. But he really won’t be... although I’m sure that’ll have to be kept among us, so please don’t say anything to anyone outside this room.”

“Nobody outside this room?” Pidge echoed. “But what about Keith? And Sven and Romelle if they turn out to be okay?” He did not mention Lance, although he thought about him as well, but he knew better than to bring up the name. “They’re going to want to know Hunk’s alive. I don’t want to see them go through thinking he’s dead if he isn’t, just like I wouldn’t!”

Allura put a hand on Pidge’s shoulder and looked earnestly into his young eyes. “Pidge, I don’t like it either. But right now it’s the only way. The political ramifications... it’s so complicated.” She sighed wearily and tried to resume a more optimistic tone. “We’ll figure something out, when things settle. For now, Lotor’s promised me he’ll stay safe. When things straighten out and Lotor tells me where he is, we can figure out how to help him.” She cast her glance downward, her heart already heavy with regret. “And hope everyone that loves him doesn’t suffer unnecessary grief too long before we can set it right.”

Coran shook his head in disbelief. “Lotor presumes to fool not only his father—a shrewd man in his own right, giving the devil his due—but also the entire Drule Empire *and* the Galaxy Alliance? Your husband’s overconfidence and arrogance is astounding, Princess, if he is indeed telling the truth.”

“Modesty was never one of Lotor’s flaws,” Haggar remarked wryly.

Looking down at the edge of the console, Pidge mulled over everything he had just been told. Trusting Lotor was counter-intuitive, but none of the other options were any more attractive and they all involved real and deadly risk to someone he cared about very much. “I gotta say I really don’t like this, Princess. How safe can Hunk be on Doom, even if they don’t execute him? You really think we can trust Lotor? I mean, how will we know he’s telling the truth?”

“We won’t,” Coran said simply. “At least not without some sort of proof.”

Allura nodded. “I know. I’ll make sure he gives it to us.”

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The clanking sound of the lock and the heavy metal door creaking open made the imprisoned Hunk sit bolt upright from his miserable slouched position in the cell. He was not sure how long it had been since he was put in there, although it felt like it had been at least a day.

After he had been taken prisoner and brought onto the Doom ship, Hunk had been separated almost right away from the other prisoners and chained up alone. He had heard the guards that manhandled him refer to him as an “important prisoner” and that had meant extra security and little chance of escape, even if he had been uninjured and not barely able to walk with his thigh wounded as it was. Once they arrived back on Doom, some soldier of a rank of importance had some robots take him to a medical facility to dress the painful laser wound. The trek through the corridors on it had been miserable; it had throbbed something fierce with every step he took. Hunk did not know why the Doomites were treating him, but he was sure it was not for any altruistic purpose. Most likely they did it either because they planned to put him to heavy slave labor or wanted him to fight in the arena and put on a good show. A part of him had wanted to refuse on principle, but he was in enough pain that when the medic put a salve on his wound, bound it, and shot him full of painkillers he did not have it in him to object. At least when they had then put him in the dark and dank cell in the bowels of Castle Doom afterward, Hunk had enough narcotic in his system to not only not feel any pain, but also to feel lightheaded and sleepy and make the experience seem surreal, at least for a little while.

The strongest effects had worn off, however, and Hunk was now a bit jumpy as his system sought to throw off the groggy feeling. It did not ease his anxiety at all when he saw who it was that had come into his cell, either. Standing above him with his arms folded and clutching an electrolash—the same one that had given him the stinging burns on his arm—was none other than the Doom commander that had captured him, Cossack the Terrible.

“Enjoying your new digs, flyboy?” he sneered.

Hunk scowled back at Cossack and tensed in anticipation of whatever awaited him. It was a given that it would not be pleasant. “What do you want?”

“Just a little inspection, that’s all.” Cossack beckoned for a couple of robot guards to enter. “Lift him up so I can get a good look at him. And I hope you’ve had your hydraulics overhauled recently, ‘cause he’s no light load.”

The former Voltron force pilot grimaced while two robots came in and roughly hauled him to a standing position. Hunk struggled a little, more out of defiance and indignation than anything else, but it was pointless and he did not bother for more than a moment. He did let out a grunt of aggravation, however, when Cossack shined a flashlight obnoxiously into his eyes.

“Brown. That’s what I thought. Pretty generic human coloring. Good.” He moved the flashlight along the length of his body and stopped at his injured thigh. “Left side, bandages wrap all around, looks to be covering at least a six inch area. Got it.” He glanced at the robots. “Any other defining scars or tattoos?”

One of the robots thrust Hunk’s forearm out toward Cossack, with no regard to the way that their metallic fingers scraped and pressed into the electrolash burns, which hurt him quite a bit even through the painkillers. “Slave tattoo, Commander,” the robot told Cossack. “An old one.”

Cossack leaned over and took a look at it under the light of the flashlight. “Ah, yeah, probably from when you were captured as a space explorer way back when. Your first visit here.” He sneered. “Boy did Yurak get his ass reamed out for you and your pals escaping. But since I always thought he was kind of an asshole, I laughed anyway. ‘Course it helps that I was assigned off planet at the time so I wasn’t involved.” He let out an amused chortle at the memory before resuming a more serious tone. “But security’s gotten a little better around here after years of putting up with Voltron, so don’t get any bright ideas this time. There’s a reason you’re in solitary, and we’ve got special plans for you.”

Hunk’s glower deepened as the robots twisted him to the side at Cossack’s direction and the commander ran the bright flashlight over his profile again. “Whatever you’re up to, you’re not getting it from me without a fight,” Hunk protested with what energy he could muster. He let out a pained grunt when the robots, finished with him for the time being, tossed him back against the wall of the cell. “Allura’ll never forgive Lotor for what he did. She might be married to him, but she’ll hate him forever for what he did on Pollux to her friends.”

“Friends that shot at her?” Cossack retorted. “I dunno, I’m not a goody-goody happy princess, but I don’t think even if I was a ‘nice girl’ like her I’d get over her being fired at by my friends after they stole my ship anytime soon.”

“You know damn well it wasn’t her that Bandor fired at!” Hunk said contemptuously.

Cossack shrugged as if that fact was unimportant. “It didn’t seem to bother him much that she was standing next to his target though. But yeah, you’re probably right that she’ll be ruffled about what went down when we went back to teach Prince Shorty a lesson.” He flashed Hunk a cocky, insincere smile that showed his fangs. “You know, you should thank her. She’s why you’re getting the VIP treatment. Lotor’s going out of his way to make it up to her. All things considered, I think those two’ll do just fine. Sorry to disappoint you.”

The ominous feelings Hunk had earlier about his fate resurfaced at the mention of his “VIP treatment.” Despite what Cossack had said, Hunk had a feeling that what was happening to him had next to nothing to do with anything Allura would have asked for on his behalf. Hunk might not have understood the decisions Allura had made as of late, but his faith in the kind of person she was in her heart had not wavered. “VIP treatment?” Hunk repeated incredulously. “I’d hate to see what you call standard.”

Sneering back at him from the doorway Cossack replied, “For losers like the Voltron Force? It’s called the Pit of Skulls. Boy, you really are thick! Haggard was right; it really must *have* been dumb luck and divine intervention that kept you with the upper hand for so long.” Cossack then disappeared through the door, cape billowing behind him, and slammed it, leaving Hunk alone to wonder just what that strange encounter had been all about, and what was still in store for him.

* * *

Sitting high on his throne, a devilish and gleeful smile lit up the harsh scaled features of King Zarkon the likes of which had not been seen by his court members in years as he watched the last few seconds tick by on his timepiece. The golden skull-shaped instrument with flashing red numbers in the mouth was one he had specifically set to synchronize with Lotor’s deadline for the red lion to be turned over. As the little alarm sounded—a shrill electronic shriek that reminded him of the time a heavy robot stepped on Cobra’s tail—Zarkon’s reptilian eyes sparkled

with smug malevolence and joy akin to the enthusiasm of one might see in a hopelessly love-struck schoolgirl fantasizing about a rendezvous with her lover. In truth there was the same level of passion behind the feeling and to Zarkon it was an equally romantic fantasy being realized. What was there not for him to love about bearing personal witness to the grisly demise of one of the Voltron Force? It was truly a red-letter day, one that would soon get redder by the spilling of the yellow lion pilot's blood.

The throne room doors opened and Lotor stepped in, answering the summons Zarkon had sent shortly before. "Father," he greeted him with a bow.

"Ah Lotor!" Zarkon's smile broadened as he addressed his son. "Do you know what time it is?"

Lotor nodded. "I do."

The king twirled his scepter in dark joviality. "It's forty-eight hours and," he glanced down at his skull stopwatch, "forty-eight seconds past your deadline." He chortled. "Isn't that an interesting coincidence?" He slid the timepiece into a pocket in his robe. "Has the red lion been turned over?"

"No Father, it has not." It was hard to tell from Lotor's rather neutral tone whether he was pleased by that or not.

"And has the pilot or anyone else from the Voltron Force, Pollux, or Galaxy Garrison contacted you to make arrangements to turn it over? To save their *beloved* friend?" He accented the stressed word with a facial expression that made his gleeful sarcasm that much clearer.

"No, Father." That time, if one looked closely, one could see a dark gleam in Lotor's eyes that bore a similarity to his father's, albeit far better contained.

“What a shame.” Zarkon gave a mock frown. “I guess this means that my poor daughter-in-law will find out the hard way how little her oh-so-loyal friends think of her feelings.”

“A pity that she has to endure that,” Lotor echoed. A dark smirk tugged at his lips; Zarkon’s enthusiasm was contagious. It was almost enough to make Lotor want to pretend he had never promised Allura that Hunk would not be harmed. Fortunately for Allura—not to mention Hunk—securing her affection was stronger motivation than a laugh with his father.

“Indeed,” Zarkon said wryly. “Merla and I will have to send her some flowers with our condolences.” The king lapsed into a momentary frown. “It is a shame Merla couldn’t be here herself to enjoy our victory. It figures that whiner Hazar would manage to put a damper on our fun enough that she had to go explain our position to the Drule Council in person. Even on Dreska, that man’s a pain in the ass.” He shook his head in disappointment, and then held up his hand, bearing both the gold ring he had worn for countless years as well as the one Haggard had forged for him recently that prevented Merla from manipulating him with her mind powers. “But now is not the time to dwell on such annoyances, not with our victorious celebration at hand,” he said with renewed enthusiasm, and turned to some servants nearby. “Some drinks?”

“Yes sire,” the slaves murmured, and scurried to fetch wine goblets for their masters while Zarkon resumed speaking.

“I want every high ranking military officer, noble, priest, and dignitary that’s physically close enough to attend assembled in this room within the hour. The execution will take place right here, right at my throne-step.” He pointed his scepter at the base where Lotor knelt. “It will be broadcast live, on every satellite frequency we can take over, so that every self-respecting Doomite, Drule-blood, and Denubian, and every Alliance fool and wanna-be rebel sees firsthand what it means to defy the might of our empire.”

Lotor nodded obligingly. “Yes Father.”

The king of Doom then raised the goblet that had just been placed in his hands as a sinister and complacent smile settled upon his features. “And until then, a toast—to victory! To the obliteration of Pollux, to the humbling of the Alliance, to the annihilation of the Voltron Force, and most importantly, to Doom!”

“To Doom!” Lotor echoed, lifting his goblet in tandem, and joined his father in a drink and a round of victorious laughter.

The End