

Necessary Masque by Cheezey
Part 2

Keith, Captain Niyte, and most of the other Galaxy Alliance soldiers helping the survivors of the Castle Pollux invasion did not see Zarkon's bloody broadcast firsthand. It did not take long for them to hear about it, however. Those on the ships stationed there spread the terrible news quickly, and when he heard it, Keith's heart sank like a lead brick. Ever practical, he had done his best to do what needed to be done and tried to shut out his own emotional pain by throwing himself into his duty. He, Niyte, and the others had been able to rescue a number of survivors from the rubble of Castle Pollux, and locate the remains of others who had not been quite as fortunate. While that was sad, at least they could be identified and their families given closure, which was more than could be said of those missing who's loved ones had to hope for the best and fear the worst simultaneously.

When he first heard the news about Hunk, Keith found that the pragmatic voice of reason that had told him such a fate was not unexpected was of far less comfort than he might have imagined. He was certainly in no way prepared for it, and it was not until he was told of his friend's fate that he realized how much irrational hope he'd had pinned on Lance being able to pull off a daring rescue in time. He demanded to see the feed, which the Alliance soldiers had recorded, and even knowing what was on it had not been enough to prepare him for the grisly sight of Lotor carrying out the execution so mercilessly and proudly. It was the latter, the flagrant flaunting and taunting of the cruel deed, the blatant disrespect for another living being's life—not to mention the woman he supposedly loved, who Keith could not imagine would ever be able to withstand such an emotional betrayal from him—that sickened him the most and filled him with more cynicism than he ever imagined possible.

"I'm so sorry for your friend," Niyte told him somberly, putting an arm on his shoulder. "He was a brave man."

"He was—and deserved better. A lot better." Keith blinked watery tears from his dark eyes. "He defended Pollux from Lotor with his life."

"Many of those who survived have him and actions of those like him to thank for it... not to mention everyone that Voltron was able to save in his time. The Voltron Force are heroes that'll always be remembered."

Keith looked away from the console and walked out of the ship on which he had watched the video, out into the ruined courtyard of Castle Pollux. “He shouldn’t have to be only ‘remembered.’” The former black lion pilot’s voice was bitter as he looked over the wreckage. “Neither should anyone Lotor’s hurt, like Bandor, or Sven or... Romelle?”

The commotion of an approaching transport convoy, with someone who looked like the last name he had spoken waving from the front of it, interrupted his words.

“Hey!” a nearby Galaxy Alliance soldier shouted. “It’s Princess Romelle!”

“She made it!”

“More of them are alive!”

Keith and Niyte exchanged looks, a spark of hope alit in their tired eyes once more, and they raced with several other soldiers to meet them. Upon recognizing them, Sven leapt down to greet them while Romelle brought their vehicle to a halt. “Keith!”

“Sven! Romelle!” Keith ran just as fast to meet his friend. “You made it!”

“Just barely,” Sven said with a wan smile as Romelle climbed down and joined them while Niyte and some others from the castle rescue crew came up from behind Keith. “It was a rough run, but we all made it, and got to town late last night.” Sven’s tone grew more serious as he got his first good long look at the wreckage of Castle Pollux up close. “Seems like there was just as rough a run here.”

Romelle gasped despite herself as she surveyed the wreckage. “Oh my god... did anyone make it?” She looked to Keith. “My brother...”

“In critical condition, Princess,” Niyte answered. “He’s still alive.”

She nodded. “I’d heard that he was injured... I guess there’s been no change?”

“None we heard of, no.”

Sven met Keith’s dark eyes. “Hunk?” he said quietly, “Lotor’s prisoner?”

The former black lion pilot’s voice choked. “Worse.”

Both Romelle and Sven’s eyes filled with horror. “No...” Romelle whispered. “Oh no.”

“Bastards,” Sven growled, clenching his fists.

Romelle blinked through the tears that filled her eyes. “What about Lance and the red lion?”

“And you,” Sven continued, realizing only then that Keith was back on Pollux after having left. “When did you come back?”

“When I heard that Pollux was being attacked.”

Niyte nodded beside him. “He briefed us back at Galaxy Garrison on what we didn’t know about the situation, and we brought the reinforcements to help out Pollux, your highness. I just wish we could’ve done more, sooner.”

“Thank heavens you and Lance did come,” Romelle said sadly, looking around. “I can only imagine how much worse it would’ve been if you hadn’t...”

Her voice trailed off in another grieved sob while Sven put an arm around her and met Keith’s eyes somberly. “Lance is all right?”

“Yeah,” Keith confirmed with a nod. “He left to see if he could,” he looked away as he found it hard to say the words now that he knew the mission was a failure, “save Hunk.” His gaze fell to the ground, heavy as his heart.

That time Romelle could not hold back an audible cry. “It’s so wrong! Hunk, my brother, all of it!”

Sven hugged her more tightly, blinking the wetness from his own eyes, but unable to find any words of comfort. Instead he just let her cry into him, taking solace in her embrace as much as she was in his. Keith went over to put his hand on Romelle’s back to offer his own support, and when he did he noticed a simple metallic band on Sven’s ring finger that he had never seen before. *That looks almost like a wedding ring*, Keith thought absently, and the association brought to his attention a metallic glint on Romelle’s finger reflecting the light against the dark clothing on Sven’s shoulder. It made him curious, but it was neither the time nor place to ask about it given the heavier matters at hand so he did not mention it.

“Your highness,” Niyte addressed Romelle quietly, “I hate to burden you further in your grief, but given that we have a leader from Pollux here now, we have to concede our authority to you from here on out per Galaxy Alliance protocol. Do you want us to stay and continue to help with the rescue efforts? Send reinforcements to defend the area against a potential follow-up attack?” After a brief pause he then added in lower tone, “Put in a request for a retaliatory strike to headquarters?”

Lifting her head from Sven’s shoulder, Romelle stepped forward and straightened. She looked past Captain Niyte for a moment, taking in the awful sight of the wreckage of her home and feeling the loss of her friends and loved ones weighing heavy on her heart, and then faced the

Galaxy Alliance officer with all the royal bearing of her station. “Right now my people and my planet are the important thing, Captain. While I want Doom to pay for what they’ve done,” her expression darkened, “as long as Pollux is protected and my people are made safe, and those surviving this are helped, that’s the priority. Please don’t let Lotor harm any more of my people, here or in any other town on Pollux he might decide makes a nice target.”

He bowed. “Of course, Princess.”

“I also want to know how my brother’s doing. I’d like to go see him, but,” she took a steady breath, “I’m the only member of the royal family left. I don’t want anyone on Pollux to think their ruling princess would desert them in their time of need.”

“Understood,” Niyte said. “We’ll do everything we can.”

“So will we,” Keith assured Romelle while Sven nodded earnestly beside him. “No matter what, whatever you need.”

“If Bandor wakes up, I want you to go to him, Keith. I want him to have a friend there who he trusts, who he knows he can count on, while Sven and I do what needs to be done here.”

“Absolutely.”

In gratitude Romelle placed a hand on Keith’s shoulder, a hand that Keith now saw most definitely had a shining metal band on it. “Thanks. For everything,” she said, and then went with Niyte aboard the command ship to find out the latest on Bandor’s condition, leaving Keith alone with Sven briefly.

“This world is lucky to have such a strong princess,” Sven mused as he watched Romelle depart with Niyte. “She’d face down the demons of the universe for her family and this world.”

“And anyone she cares about,” Keith agreed, and gave Sven a pointed look. “Especially you.”

Sven’s brow rose at the remark, although he could not help but smile as well. “I’d do the same for her.”

Keith smiled back at him in return. “I know. You vowed to.”

“What?” the surprised Sven replied, while Keith gestured to the band on his friend’s hand.

“You married her, didn’t you?”

That he had guessed surprised him, but he did not bother to deny it. “Earlier today. She insisted.” Sven’s smile broadened. “I tried to tell her that I was just a pilot and she was a princess and that she should find a prince like she’s supposed to, but she wouldn’t have it.”

Keith let out a dark chuckle. “Well you ought to know better than to argue with a headstrong princess when she gets an idea into her head.” Though his words had been intended in light jest, as soon as he spoke them they hung in the air like a dark specter, the shade of Allura and her ill-thought decision to marry Lotor that had brought them all to the state they were in. A painful silence fell over them for a long moment until Keith forced himself to break it with words of optimism. “I’m sure you two will be very happy together. Pollux is lucky to have you in its royal family.”

“And Bander will be king one day anyhow, so what does it matter if Romelle marries a commoner, right?” Sven said in a tone far more hopeful than he actually felt regarding the young prince’s critical state.

“Absolutely.” Keith gave his friend a congratulatory clap on the back, and they made their way back toward the crowd.

“For now though, keep this between us. She wants to make a proper announcement at a better time.”

“Of course.”

* * *

The same grisly execution scene that Lance had seen in the red lion, that Allura had seen in Admiral Yaktlitz’s ship, and that those on Pollux had witnessed over the ultrawave also aired in real time on the screen in the Castle of Lions. The audience consisted of a horrified and disgusted Pidge and Coran, a mildly impressed Haggar, and an aghast and distraught Nanny who walked in just as it ended, with Hunk’s head being severed and skewered on the pike. “My god!” Allura’s governess screamed, and buried her face in her hands. “Those savages! Oh, poor Hunk!”

Pidge whirled toward Haggar with anger burning in his eyes. “You said he had a plan!” he yelled, his voice furious with accusation. “Then tell me how that’s not real!”

Shaking with emotion himself, Coran put his arms around Nanny’s shoulders. “He swore to Allura that it would be staged.”

“It looked like Hunk to me!” Pidge grabbed a blaster and aimed it at Haggar. “Tell me it’s fake! Prove it!”

“Don’t threaten me,” Haggar hissed, and with surprising quickness aimed her staff and stunned him with a blast of magic. “What’s the matter? Don’t you trust Prince Lotor’s word like your dear princess does?”

Spurred from her grief by anger at the attack on Pidge, Nanny broke away from Coran and lunged in her direction. “Deceitful old witch!” she shouted, while Coba hissed and leapt at the woman, protecting his mistress and forcing Nanny to step back. “We all know he lies like a fish swims in water. It’s all he does! And you leave Pidge alone!”

“It’s a stun beam. He’ll live,” Haggar stated, irritated that politics demanded that she had to be that merciful in the first place. She turned and glowered at Pidge as he stood back up. “But the next time you point a weapon at me, I won’t take Prince Lotor’s pet princess’ feelings into consideration.”

Coran frowned and forced a diplomatic, albeit icy, tone. “That execution was gruesomely convincing. And I’m sure the princess would appreciate her friends remaining unharmed, so if both of you could please exercise some restraint...”

“Provided I’m not provoked,” Haggar retorted. She then glanced at the screen, which displayed the last of the procession leaving Zarkon’s throne room before it faded to black. “As for Lotor’s little production, I must say I’m impressed that he pulled it off. Without me there and that buffoon Cossack helping him, I half expected a dummy with a balloon for a head to show up.”

Pidge did not argue with Coran, but did not apologize for his actions either. “Well *someone* was killed,” he insisted, eyeing Haggar suspiciously. “I’ve seen death, seen it up close, thanks to people like you!”

“Yes, someone was killed.” Haggar spoke as though she was talking to someone very simple and insignificant. “But it wasn’t your friend.”

Coran remained suspicious. “You’re certain of that?”

Cackling, the witch replied, “I see you’re not.”

Nanny's emotions simmered to the surface again, and she waved her fist in contempt. "Cruel, evil hag! To take pleasure in this—this barbaric bloodsport!"

"Now you know why I've been so bored on Arus," Haggar quipped back before returning her attention to Coran. "But to answer your question and put the trigger happy boy and hysterical house-frump's fears to rest, yes."

"How do you know?" Pidge demanded.

"Because I'm a pro at things like this." She waved them over to her crystal and conjured an image in it, one that showed Hunk alone in a dark cell still quite alive. "See? They killed a look-alike." Haggar smirked coldly at Nanny. "At your darling princess' order. I wonder how she'd feel knowing that Lotor simply killed someone else to appease her rather than kill her friend."

"You're a monster," Nanny whispered in hoarse disgust, and then crossed herself out of respect to the innocent man that had died to perpetuate the charade.

Haggar sneered back at the governess. "You say the sweetest things."

Pidge meanwhile fell silent, feeling an unpleasant mix of relief and guilt upon seeing proof that Hunk was still alive, but at the cost of another man's life. *I hate this*, he thought miserably. *Worrying about Hunk and Bantor, wondering where Lance is, what Keith and Sven and Romelle are doing and if they need me, and what's going to happen to Allura and Arus with her married to that evil psycho!*

Coran's thoughts were equally troubled as he turned back toward the now-blank monitor and let out a weary sigh. "Oh, I hope we hear from the princess soon."

* * *

The mood was far more festive on planet Doom, especially amongst the crowd gathered at the Pit of Skulls where Cossack and his entourage had just finished tossing the headless remains of what was presumed to be Hunk into the Pit of Skulls. Commander Cossack was in his element; he loved the roar of a gleeful crowd honoring him as a hero, and while his following was not as large as the one that had gone with the prince into the city, it was still a sizeable group and contained a number of important figures from each of the noble houses. He noticed many high-standing members of each of the nine high houses in attendance and even some of the high seats, though he noticed that of those that were present, their spouses were not. It was an easy guess that they had gone with Lotor; appearances were of paramount importance in the nobility and none of their figureheads would want to miss the opportunity to be recognized as being supportive of the prince in his moment of victory, lest it cost them precious royal favor. Still Cossack was a bit dismayed that of those he did recognize, he did not see his own wife among his crowd. He did see some of his Aldar'ach blood relations, however, and several of the Tonorm'oith clan, including his inherited in-law Tonchelon, the weaselly younger brother of Kuryaki's deceased first husband Sevakor, and Sevakor's sister Nyrana.

"Cossack! Nice show, son!" his father, Lord Tadack's, voice boomed over the disbursing crowd as he approached.

"Thanks Dad." Cossack grinned at him and his sister, brother-in-law, and youngest brother that stood with his father. "Glad you guys came to my party."

His sister Sulestri, a stocky Doomite woman with well-kept gray hair and dressed in stylish clothing for her age of just a few years younger than Cossack, wrinkled her nose. "Well, the city events get so crowded, they get ten times as many commoners showing up. Who wants to deal with that?"

"The bars passing out free and cheap drinks at things like this too also draws 'em out," Tadack said.

"Let me guess, that's why Stryck's there?" Cossack guessed, naming his other brother that was not present.

Cossack's youngest sibling, Tadrán, a boy just shy of twelve with a lean build and an impish smile, nodded. "He plans to get sloshed and get laid afterward. He'll probably stagger back from some club at dawn and crash with some whore or on a brothel couch." He shrugged and rolled his eyes, as that was typical behavior of their absent brother, who prioritized partying much like Haggar did her magic.

"Your mother wants me to pass on her well-wishes to you for your role in the victory on Pollux, of course," Tadrán went on to say. "She, Stryck, and Cassri went to the other ceremony, but they want you to know that they're proud of you too."

"I doubt Visycka or Cassri will bother with the seedy bars or whorehouses though," Zalik chortled, naming Cossack's mother and youngest sister, and adjusted his glasses. Though many on Doom opted to fix problem eyes surgically or with cybernetics, Zalik preferred the flexibility that the old-fashioned accessories afforded him, an ironic choice considering he was otherwise what many would consider a tech geek by Doom standards.

"Thanks. Tell 'em I missed seeing them here." Cossack frowned as he saw Tonchelon and Nyrana approaching. Though he had nothing specific against the latter, her brother was annoying enough that he was wary of anyone who kept company with him by default. "Tonchelon. I'm surprised to see you here."

His kinsman by marriage smiled insincerely at him. "Why Commander, don't tell me you doubt the family's well wishes on such an auspicious occasion?"

"Congratulations on your victory at Pollux, Commander," Nyrana said afterward. She had the same greenish skin tone shared by her brother Tonchelon and late brother Sevakor, as well as the large canine-shaped ears that many of the Tonorm'oith clan had. They twitched ever-so slightly as she addressed Cossack. "You do us proud as our high seat. Voltron's been a personal grudge of our family's for years."

"Tell me about it," he chortled in response. "He's a dirty word in our household."

A woman several years younger than Nyrana, around Sulestri's age Cossack guessed, that bore a strong familial resemblance to Nyrana, spoke up. "Well Aunt Kuryaki's got every reason to hate him. He destroyed cousin Yurak's reputation and shamed our entire family by extension."

"Raddena," Nyrana said sternly, narrowing her eyes at the girl at her side, "this isn't the time or place."

She frowned sourly. "It's true. Voltron's a menace. It never should've come to that." She looked to Cossack. "I'm glad it's over, and I hope you obliterate Pollux for harboring those damn lions. I'd just as soon as see them all melted into scrap."

Tadack chuckled. "Your daughter's got the fighting spirit, Nyrana. Maybe Cossack could put that to good use in the fleet."

Straightening himself in a self-important manner, Tonchelon scoffed, "My niece is *hardly* a soldier, Lord Tadack, feisty or not."

"I like a battle like any Doomite, but I prefer sniping strategically as opposed to getting my hands dirty," Raddena admitted with a smirk. "Mother says that makes me courtier material. She's probably right."

A chuckle went through the group save Tonchelon. "Sounds like every courtier I ever dealt with," Zalik agreed.

"Well if something opens up, I'll let you know," Cossack told the girl, and smiled at Tonchelon in a way that offered no reassurance that he would not offer his niece something he did not approve of simply to be contrary.

The rest of their conversation was then cut off by the loud roar of approaching spacecrafts above, causing them and the remaining spectators conversing amongst each other in the crowd to look up.

“What’s—?” Tonchelon started, but a louder exclamation from Zalik at the same time interrupted him.

“Shit!” He recognized the infamous-on-Doom red trail behind the lead ship, and the distinctive gleam in the wake of a second tiger-shaped one accompanying others behind it. “That’s the red—”

“Lion. And some of his buddies, yeah,” Cossack finished irritably. “Showing up too late to be of any good to their dead pal, but still in time to rain on my party.” Just then Cossack’s communicator buzzed loudly with the customized alarm that signaled an order coming directly from King Zarkon. It was, appropriately, a recorded imitation of a robeast in the midst of a deadly roar. He sighed. “It’s been fun, but duty calls.”

Tadack clapped him on the back. “Give ‘em hell, son!”

“Maybe you can add those pilots’ bodies to the Pit next,” Nyrana suggested with a smile.

Stepping back so that Cossack could pass, Tonchelon gave him an utterly fake pleasant look. “Continue to do your family’s good name proud, Commander.”

“Wouldn’t dream of less, Tonchy!” he said, enjoying the notion of how the informality would bristle him even if he did not have time to witness and savor it, and ran to his transport craft. “Catch you later!” Cossack waved and left the festive crowd, now watching the skies as Castle Doom’s automated defenses kicked in and returned fire at the enemy ships, behind him.

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“The nerve of interrupting my triumph!” Lotor sneered as he stormed into the control center of Castle Doom, arriving shortly after Cossack.

King Zarkon’s image was also on the monitor, keeping close tabs on the operations in the control center via ultrawave transmission. He had two channels open, one broadcasting directly to them and another shared with their broadcast to the invading ships. “Well well well, what do we have here? Lions and tigers and Galaxy Alliance rebels, oh my!”

“You’re too late to save your friend now, Lance,” Lotor taunted along with his father. “But we’ll take your offer of the lion anyway and return the body in a gesture of goodwill.”

“We’ll keep the head though,” Cossack finished. “We like the ambiance it adds to the city square.”

A barrage of fire from the red lion’s mouth scorched the top tower of Castle Doom. “You bastards are going to pay for what you did to Hunk!”

Lotor instructed the robots to return fire from several hidden tentacle-shaped guns that emerged from the castle wall to take precise aim. “What we did? No Lance, it’s what *you* did when you stole Allura’s lion. I was even generous enough to give you a deadline, which you willfully ignored. You should’ve learned by now that we don’t bluff.”

Stride’s sleek and swift tiger fighter expertly destroyed several of the slithering projectiles. “You’re honorless dogs.”

“Stride! I’m hurt,” Zarkon said in a mock wounded tone. “We offered a fair deal and they didn’t meet the deadline. We’re still willing to trade. Consider the head the late fee.”

The attacking ships strafed the side of Castle Doom, causing some surface damage, but their shields deflected the brunt of it, leaving their operations and structural integrity uncompromised. Cossack laughed and fired back at them, landing a fatal shot one of the ships in their envoy. “You’ll have to do better than that. We took note of how your tiger fighter broke through our weaknesses last time you showed up. It won’t be so easy to show off this time around.” He deployed another attack, one that launched several discs into the air around the enemy crafts that emitted disruptive energy beams which caused severe electronic interference with their navigational equipment.

It was not enough to bring the enemy down, but it was enough to disorient the pilots. One of Lance and Stride’s companion ships had just picked up the escape pod from the ship that Cossack shot down just in time to get caught in one of the disrupter fields. It spun helplessly out of control for several long moments that enabled the robots in the command center to target it with a fatal shot, destroying it before any escape pods, even the survivor of the first crash, could escape. Lotor cackled viciously. “More of your friends die for you. Your red lion is aptly colored with all the blood on its claws.”

The tiger fighter weaved through the onslaught of laser fire and disrupter fields, and landed on the east side of the tower firing most heavily upon them, taking out several of its offensive weapons with its claws and teeth. “They knew the risks when they came to fight at his side. They died a valiant death, fighting for what they believed in.”

Zarkon let out a bored groan. “Oh Stride, how much of that self-righteous Galaxy Alliance fruit punch have you been drinking these days?” He twirled his scepter. “You had such promise in your day, but you never did see the big picture. Unfortunately your type never learns. You fight for your high-minded principles your whole life and what does it get you? Your pride, at least until someone younger, better, or stronger trumps you and you realize that for all of your blustering, all you are is a naïve corpse whose memorial will read ‘Here lies Stride, the honorable’, not ‘Stride the King’ or ‘Stride, Ruler of Galaxies’. You’ll never have any legacy that’ll count for anything in the grand scheme of things.” Several snake-like projections erupted from the stone below the tower upon which the tiger fighter had landed, and they coiled around the ship’s legs, sending burning blasts of energy into it.

Stride let out a strained growl of pain. “What you think counts and what I do are very different things,” he retorted between strained breaths. “And ultimately *you*’ll be the one that finds out what really counts the hard way.”

“I got your back, Stride!” Lance flew in and slashed the deadly coils away from the legs of his ally’s ship. “Hang in there!”

Grinning, Lotor pressed another button on the console that released a robeast from the pen near the castle. “You may have his back, but I’ve got yours! Robeast! Finish off those invaders!”

Lance and Stride, recovering now that the red lion had broken him free, regrouped with their only remaining companion as the robeast launched into the airspace in front of them. The creature was unlike any native to a planet any of them had seen, a spindly beast with long and slender ears that ended in two small forks, legs and arms with double sets of knees and elbows that allowed it flexibility close to that of a tentacle or snake, but with the musculature and leverage of jointed appendages. It had only two eyes, but six sets of spikes on its body—two on its chest, two on its back, and one on each hip on the side. They found when it lunged toward them that the spikes could shoot deadly spear-like projectiles charged with energy.

“I swear Haggar makes these things uglier every time,” Lance said with a grimace.

Cossack heard the muttered remark over the ultrawave and laughed snidely. “She only makes her best for protecting Castle Doom. Show ‘em what you’ve got, Twister!”

Lotor cast his commander an odd look. “‘Twister’?”

He shrugged. “I get a kick out of giving them nicknames.”

The prince snorted in half amusement, half derision, which graduated to a genuine chuckle when Twister flew into a tumbling roll that barreled right at the remaining ships. Spikes sparking, it bowled straight into the remaining ship that was not the red lion or tiger fighter, striking it with a deadly blow.

“I’m hit!” the pilot shouted in a panic.

“Eject! We’ll get you!” Lance assured him. *I won’t let you die too, he vowed. Lotor isn’t taking any more lives today, I swear it!*

Fortunately for Lance and Stride’s ally, Lance’s luck had returned at least briefly, for he was able to keep that promise and scoop his escape pod into the red lion’s mouth safely while his damaged ship crashed to the rocky ground below. Castle Doom focused their fire heavily on the red lion and tiger fighter, and between them and the robeast, it was fast becoming clear that they were outgunned. One or the other they might have had a chance against, but not both, especially with the red lion unable to use its fire attack while holding the other pilot’s escape pod in its jaws.

The two of them fought the robeast and dodged the ever-increasing laser fire onslaught from Castle Doom valiantly, but before long Stride’s voice sounded in the speakers of the red lion’s cabin over their private channel. “Lance, this is your mission and you have to make the decision. I swore loyalty to you and I’ll follow your lead, but this can only go one way. We can retreat now, or fight to an honorable death avenging Hunk, our lost compatriots, and the innocent of Pollux.”

“I’m with you too,” the surviving pilot in the escape pod echoed. “I don’t want to die... but if it means dealing a blow to Zarkon’s empire, then my wife’ll at least be a proud widow.”

With a clenched jaw and fingers wrapped tightly around the controls, Lance blinked the heated tears of emotion from his eyes. He hated Lotor and what he, Zarkon, and the others had led his friends and loved ones to. His heart and soul ached for Hunk, for Prince Bandor and the good people of Pollux, and for the brave fighters that had come with him that day because the Galaxy Alliance was too tied up in protocol to send a proper envoy to help them, who died for their courage and altruism. He considered driving the red lion right into the heart of Castle Doom and squashing Zarkon squarely on his smug throne, or what it would be like to go out in a blaze of glory hitting the power station of Castle Doom and setting it and every last Doomite inside it up in a brilliant explosion. Lance knew that if he so chose, Stride would follow him to his end and make his last blow count for just as much and that between them, the red lion and tiger fighter would deal quite a blow to their empire.

On the other hand, the Alliance had already lost the blue lion forever and the black, green, and yellow lions were locked away inactive with their keys in Allura's well-meaning but misguided hands. Though he knew that while she would never let them be used to do harm, she was also blind to the fact that holding the lions and not letting them fight Doom's forces was akin to sentencing those they could have helped to just as bad a fate. Could he live with himself if he led two more ships that could stand up to Doom's attacks fall in a suicide mission that would, at best, only destroy Zarkon, Lotor, and some of their minions? They could not destroy all of Doom in that one blow, and another dictator would rise to take Zarkon's place sooner than not.

"Lance?" Stride's urgent voice broke into his thoughts again.

The red lion pilot weighed his options again, and he pictured the faces of his friends, the two whose lives he would take with him. Stride was too good a man and too good a fighter for the universe to lose so soon, and his other companion had a wife and family, people that loved him. Lance, too, did not want to die, and he was pretty sure that if Hunk was with him, he would have followed his lead to help a friend, but also would have told him not to kill himself on his account. He realized in that moment if their roles were reversed, and he was the one watching Hunk from the astral, he would be hollering at him to not get himself killed while there was the opportunity for him to leave, come back, and kick ass at better odds without having to die in the process.

"I told myself I wasn't going to let Lotor take any more lives today and I meant it. Hunk wouldn't want us to die avenging him, and the Alliance needs us and our ships on their team." Lance sighed; he hated running from the likes of Lotor and his ilk, it chafed at his pride and made him feel like a coward, even though he knew logically it was the right choice. "We go back and regroup."

"I'm with you." Stride's reply was to the point, but sincere. The tiger fighter and red lion rose high into Doom's sky, pulling back from the castle's fire with only the robeast chasing them at that point.

"We can fight and destroy it in space. It'll take a beating in the energy fields around Doom as it is," Lance said as they gained altitude with the beast on their tail.

The retreat signaling their victory thoroughly pleased their enemy in the castle. “Uh oh, looks like the kitties don’t want to play with us anymore,” Lotor said with a cruel laugh.

Zarkon joined his son in his mean-spirited laughter. “The proud Stride and the red lion run like scared little kittens. This is truly a greeting card moment!”

“It’s far from over, Zarkon,” Stride snarled contemptuously as their connection grew faint from distance, the feline ships now far from Castle Doom and high in the planet’s atmosphere.

“Not by a long shot. Count on it!” Lance finished in echo.

The connection then broke completely, and Lotor and Cossack watched as Twister followed the red lion and tiger fighter into space, where it soon lost the battle to the two enemy ships. Neither was terribly concerned, they had robeasts aplenty in their pens and neither the red lion nor the tiger fighter were in any condition to blast back down for an instant rematch. Cossack shook his head as they left. “I’m quakin’ in my boots,” he said sarcastically to the monitor that displayed their retreating forms.

Lotor eyed the screen with an aura of gloating arrogance. “Let them come back. Without Voltron they’re a mere annoyance to us. We’ve got what we want.”

“*You*’ve got what you want, Lotor,” Zarkon corrected his son suddenly over the other monitor. “Yes, we’ve eliminated Voltron and conquered Arus, and you’ve got your little princess, but we still don’t have a full set of lions. I want that red one and its loudmouthed pilot’s head to complete our collection, and I still want Pollux destroyed. And after that little display, I’m adding Stride and his striped little ship to our list of trophies to acquire too.”

“And you’ll have it, Father.” Lotor folded his arms confidently, unable to help feeling smug given the victories he had under his belt for the day. Not only had he gained the soaring approval of the people of Doom and the Drule Empire, he had humbled the red lion and that arrogant Stride, and still managed to pull it all off without breaking his promise to Allura to not harm her precious pilot friend. His father was clearly none the wiser about that, and soon he

would have his beloved Allura at his side once more as well. A smile spread across the prince's face as he then inquired as to the status of her ship and heard that she would be arriving shortly. "Keep an eye on things here until they're out of our territory, and then you're dismissed," he told Cossack, and then left with nothing but his victories and Allura on his mind.

Cossack nodded to Lotor as he departed, and monitored the screens for a short while longer. "What a bunch of losers," he muttered with a shake of his head, once it was clear that they were not returning. "You tin-heads think you can handle everything here now that the pussies went home?"

"Yes, Commander," was the robots' unanimous response.

"Good. I'm gonna go grab my celebratory beer then. They invaded before I even got one." He straightened his helmet and headed out to the landing bay where his transport craft was parked. When he arrived, however, he was surprised to see his wife Kuryaki emerge from another one nearby.

"Cossack!" She approached him and drew him into a warm embrace. "Just the commander I came to see."

"Hey baby," he greeted her with a jovial smile. "What're you doing here?"

"I was in the city when I heard the red lion attacked. Of course I knew you and the soldiers would take care of it, but still, how aggravating, right in the middle of the victory ceremonies and all." She shook her head, the polished metal on her arm band glinting in the artificial lighting of the bay as she did so.

"Yeah. Even the pieces of Voltron have bad timing," Cossack quipped back, before giving her a more serious look. "Sorry I missed you out at the Pit. You're probably not sorry to have missed Tonchelon, though."

Wincing briefly at the mention of her brother-in-law, Kuryaki then gave Cossack an apologetic look. “Oh, yes, I do regret that I couldn’t go with you. You know how it is, though, fond as I am of you, it wouldn’t do to not have our house presence there for the prince. And I certainly didn’t want Tonchelon representing us.” She put a hand on his arm, the one that bore the bracer she gave him in their marriage ceremony. “That’s one of the things I came here to talk to you about, actually, that and to say I’m glad you gave that worthless space explorer and his friends what for. I swear, the moment they’re all dead and rotting can’t come soon enough for me.” Her expression darkened, but it passed quickly, and she then leaned up and gave Cossack a light kiss on the lips. “You and the prince were quite magnificent in today’s ceremony, though.”

Immediately the commander’s ego fluffed at the praise. “Thanks! Cossack the Terrible does his best for Doom.”

“Indeed he does,” she agreed. “And as such, I’d like you to come by the estate tonight if you can.”

“Anything special going on?” He hoped so, a nice dinner in his honor at the home estate, followed with the lusty attentions of his wife and the ability to sleep in the following morning sounded wonderful to him.

Kuryaki nodded. “I’ve ordered the servants to prepare a festive meal celebrating the end of Voltron and your part in it. A number of the family will be there, especially since Prestus also arrived this morning. Unfortunately Ryton won’t be able to make it; he had to visit his own parents for their family’s celebratory meal. I’d hoped you’d have the chance to meet him, but maybe next time.”

“Prestus,” Cossack repeated, searching his memory for which relative that was, and mildly disappointed that her invitation had emphasized socializing with his in-laws and no mention of her showing him personal admiration in an intimate way afterward.

“Your grandson... well, step-grandson?” she reminded him archly. “I told you about it earlier this week.”

“Oh yeah.” He vaguely remembered, before all of the Voltron lion-related fecal matter had hit the fan, her telling him that one of her daughter’s kids was going to be on-planet with their father for a visit and that he would be staying at the estate, and that he was supposed to meet him at some point. Cossack still had not met Kuryaki’s daughter or her family because they lived on the planet Azuit, a far trip from Doom. With everything else going on, he had forgotten all about it, not that his in-laws ranked particularly high on his priority list anyhow.

“So you’ll be there?”

“Sure,” he said. “I was actually headed out that way now—”

The arrival of another ship in the bay interrupted their conversation. Cossack recognized it immediately as the *Zithkar-Ven*, the battleship sent to retrieve Princess Allura from Arus. It seemed that Prince Lotor knew it had come as well, for he entered the landing bay mere seconds after it did.

A royal guardsman blew a horn to catch the attention of those present. “Stand aside for the arrival of her highness Princess Allura, wife of Prince Lotor!”

Kuryaki’s nose wrinkled in obvious distaste. “That’s my cue to leave. I’ll see you back at home celebrating the end of at least *one* of Voltron’s pilots.”

Her tone was low and sour as she slipped into her ship, reminding Cossack of just how well she would not have taken to the notion of secretly harboring the not-really-dead Hunk as Lotor had earlier suggested to him as a way of keeping him safe and out of sight. He gave her a quick wave goodbye as she disappeared into her craft, just in time for it to appear that she had simply missed the announcement and was not deliberately snubbing the prince’s wife.

On the other side of the bay, Prince Lotor did not notice or care about what transpired between Cossack and his wife anyhow. While he waited for Allura to disembark he only vaguely noticed the commander, now by himself, standing outside of his wife’s transport craft, grounded per protocol as all traffic was until Allura’s landing party was inside Castle Doom.

There was not a long wait. A moment later the doors to the *Zithkar-Ven* opened and Allura came rushing out, past Admiral Yaklitz, past the armed guards at the ramp, and ran toward Lotor in a way that Nanny would have told her was rather unbecoming for a woman of her station had she witnessed it. Her governess would have approved more of Allura's next move, however, which was to go directly to Lotor, arms outstretched to greet her, and slap him hard across the face, which until that moment had worn a rather pleased look.

"How *could* you?" The princess' furious cry echoed throughout the landing bay, which was now dead silent save for the mechanical hum of ships in idling mode.

The stunned Lotor began to reply, "Allura, I—"

"No!" she hollered, cutting him off, tears streaming down her face. "No more lies! You promised me!" Her angry voice broke with a sob. "You killed Hunk! You promised me you wouldn't hurt him! How could you? Liar!" She went to strike him again, but that time Lotor anticipated it and grabbed her hand before it could land.

"Listen to me, Allura!" Lotor's reply was heated and it was obvious that he was trying hard to rein in his temper. Allura did not realize it, but she had just done something that no one except his father had ever done and lived to tell about before—strike and insult him in public. That alone was telling of the level of feeling Lotor had for the Arusian princess, which the stunned Cossack bearing witness to the display wondered if she even understood.

Still crying, Allura yelled back at him, "I won't listen to you, murderer! You promised me, you said you loved me! You're incapable of love!"

Allura's words stung Lotor far more than any blow she might have landed on his face, and he tightened his grip on her fist. "You misjudge me," he said through a clenched jaw, "as usual. You ought to know by now how much I love you." He glowered down at her, the inner voices of those that mocked him in the past for loving the princess of Arus as strongly as he did echoing through his mind. He drew a deep breath in an effort to restrain that surge of emotion lest he do anything he would later regret, and it was then that he noticed his audience of assorted

guardsmen, soldiers, robots, and Admiral Yaklitz and Cossack. Channeling his anger into that problem first, Lotor gestured around wildly shouting, “All of you! Dismissed! Now!”

Immediately the crowd scattered like vampire bats exposed to a bright light, but while Cossack was making his exit, he was surprised to hear Lotor bark his name before he quite made it out. “Cossack! Not you. Get over here.”

Oh shit, I don't want to be his marriage counselor, the commander groaned inwardly, figuring that nothing good for him could possibly be coming from whatever Lotor was about to say or do. He approached and looked uncertainly from the angry tear-stained face of Allura to the fed up and frustrated one of his prince. “Sire?”

“I’m going to take Allura for a walk through the south side of the castle to calm her down,” Lotor said icily, keeping his grip tight on the struggling princess’ wrist, ignoring her protests. “You are going to clear the area and make sure that nothing and no one there will upset her further.” He gave the commander a pointed look. “And should you see anything that might *improve* her mood, make sure it’s taken care of. Understood?”

Catching the double meaning of Lotor’s order, Cossack bowed obediently. While it was true the south side was the “scenic walk” through the castle in the general direction toward the prince’s private quarters, cutting through a courtyard and having minimal servant and soldier foot traffic, it also passed a corridor not far from where Hunk was being kept in secret. It was an easy guess that finding something to improve her mood meant proving that her friend was alive, as promised. “Yes Sire.”

“Good.” Lotor turned back to Allura as Cossack left. She had quit trying to wrench her arm free of Lotor’s grip, but she continued to glare at him. The hateful look in her eyes pierced his heart and riled his anger enough that it made it difficult for him to resist striking her, but somehow he managed, knowing in the back of his mind that such behavior would only drive her even farther from his love. Instead, he said with unmasked spite and condescension, “Are you willing to talk now?”

Unaffected by his tone, Allura scowled at him. “I have nothing to say to you that I didn’t say already. After what you did...” She looked away in disgust. “Nothing you can say will *ever* be able to make me trust you again.”

“Ironic,” Lotor scoffed, “considering it seems I’m the one who’s misplaced my trust in you thinking you might trust *me* for once.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she demanded as they began to walk, their path already clear of any unwanted passers-by as they headed toward the south side of Castle Doom.

“It means that if you trusted me and what I promised you, that you would’ve given me a chance to explain everything to you before assuming I lied to you.”

His words caught her off guard, and she looked up at him, only then noticing the flash of hurt in his yellow eyes as they stared down at her. “So are you telling me what was broadcast to the entire Galaxy Alliance when I wasn’t there to stop you wasn’t real?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m telling you.”

Her glare softened to a frown, and a brief silence fell over them as they walked until Allura ended it. “You lied to everyone else then, and to me by letting me think you’d wait until I was here.”

Lotor looked ahead as they walked, loathing the way her disapproval made him feel, especially since he was not used to concerning himself with the feelings of others. “I never told you when I’d do it, so I’d hardly call that a lie. As for everyone else, you knew the plan, and I certainly never promised to be honest with everyone,” he finished on a sarcastic note. “And really, Allura,” he faced her again, “you don’t put me in a position to do it.”

Allura started to voice a response, but stopped as the uncomfortable notion that he had a point settled in. They walked in silence again until she finally said, "If Hunk is alive and you didn't kill him, then I'm sorry." Her voice was quiet, but sincere. "But for me to believe that..."

"You'll have to see him," Lotor guessed, and let out a weary sigh. "I figured as much. Believe me, I know your trust doesn't come easily, Allura."

They turned sharply and went down a dark corridor that Allura did not recognize. It was a cramped, twisted, and out-of-the way passage that was dimly lit, full of doors that required Lotor to put in a special code to unlock, and eerily devoid of anyone. The farther in they went, the more it smelled of mold and must, and an almost palpable atmosphere of oppression and misery choked the stale air of the place.

"I know this isn't the way to your quarters."

Lotor let out a dark chuckle. "No. It's the way to your friend's, actually. Temporarily, anyway." He stopped before one locked door and stepped in front of her to make sure he had her full attention before continuing. "Understand that what we've done is enough to have us both killed on my father's and the Drule Empire's terms. This favor, this secret, is a matter of life and death. You have to understand that, Allura. There can be no mistakes, no slip-ups, no references that might give anyone reason to question the execution. It's not what you want for your friend, but it's the best I can do." He paused and then added, "I regret that I had to have it play out this way, but making you believe it was true with a genuine, public reaction was the only way to make sure the charade was convincing enough to convince my father and everyone else. After all, everyone knows you would never accept your friend's death right in front of your face no matter *how* good an act you tried to put on."

The look in Lotor's eyes and the conviction with which he spoke made it clear to Allura that he was being honest with her, brutally so, and that both frightened and relieved her at once. She felt better knowing that he had honored her wish to spare Hunk and was earnestly trying to please her, especially now that they were inextricably tied together in marriage, but the web of deceptions, half-truths, and appeasements that put them in precarious positions seemed to grow thicker and more dangerous with every decision they made. She wondered if they would ever manage to pull themselves and those she cared about back out of it again. Lotor's decision to deliberately hurt her to make her part of a charade that she asked him to pull off to fool everyone else was but one example of the mass of contradictions her life had become. And Hunk, until

that moment she had not really thought about the logistics of his fate, and what it could mean for him, them, and those that helped them if it leaked. That in turn meant that Hunk, while alive, was certainly not in for pleasant times ahead, perhaps for the rest of his life. Allura had thought, she realized naïvely so, that once things settled down and had lined themselves out, that she would be able to free him and send him home to a friendly world in the Galaxy Alliance. What Lotor had just told her drove home how foolish she was to think that it could be resolved so simply, and it made her heart ache even more.

She looked at the locked door, distressed. “Will he...? I mean, he won’t have to live *here* in a cell his whole life, will he? That’s just...”

“Almost enough to make you wish you were dead,” Lotor finished for her.

Allura bit her lip. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“No.” He smiled ruefully. “You don’t think as darkly as I do, Allura. It’s one of the things I find so fascinating about you.” Lotor opened the door, and they entered a chamber with three cell doors, one on each of the other walls.

“Is this it?” Allura asked, distressed. “Where he’ll stay?”

“Only for now.” Lotor closed the door. “Cossack!” he shouted. “Are things ready?”

The cell door to their left opened, and Commander Cossack emerged, backing toward the center of the room. A robot followed him, hauling the bound and bruised Hunk out for inspection.

“Hunk!” Allura rushed to her friend’s side, tears of relief welling up in her eyes. She immediately threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly, unmindful of the dirt and grime clinging to his skin but unable to help but notice the soiled bandages on his leg and the heavy shackles binding his arms and feet. “Oh thank Arus you’re alive!”

“Thank Arus? Thank us, I think,” Cossack quipped, folding his arms across his chest.

Lotor frowned at the commander. “Be quiet.”

“Yes Sire.”

Allura knelt by Hunk’s side and touched the edge of his bandage. “Oh, you were hurt badly. Lotor, can you—?”

“It’s being tended to.” It was clear from Lotor’s tone that he had chosen to do so only because he knew Allura wanted him cared for.

Hunk blinked at forced a weak smile at Allura. Though he had good reason to be angry with her, he was so relieved to see a friendly face that he did not ponder anything deeper than that. “Princess... good to see you.”

“I’m so sorry Hunk.” She hugged him tighter. “I hate that this has happened...”

“Ah... don’t,” he cut her off. While he felt no true malice toward Allura, he also did not want to hear apologies or promises that the Doomites with her would inevitably go back on and betray at the first opportunity. “You don’t need to say anything, Princess. I know you do what you have to. Just like I did.”

“I’m doing what I can, Hunk, I promise you that,” she told him earnestly. “Please know that. I love you, love all my friends.”

Hunk looked back at her with tired eyes. “Yeah, I know that. We all love you too.”

The declarations of love, even that of friendship, irritated Lotor and led Cossack to roll his eyes. “So as you see,” Lotor interrupted, placing a possessive hand on Allura’s shoulder, “your friend is alive and well. I gave you my word that he would remain unharmed and so he has... and will.”

Allura looked uncertainly from Hunk to Cossack, acting as her friend’s jailer, and then to Lotor. “Yes. And you’ll care for his wound? You won’t leave him here will you? In this awful cell? I know what you told me before, Lotor, but there’s got to be some way...”

Lotor waved his hand dismissively to assuage her concerns. “Cossack has that covered. Don’t you, Cossack?”

The commander nodded and smiled at her, which did not do all that much to reassure Allura, and filled Hunk with a new sense of dread. “Sure do,” Cossack said. “Being that we got to keep this low profile, your pal here’s gonna get a whole new identity and cushy digs. As far as everyone outside this room is concerned, he’s dead, so there’s no problem, and he gets a new life. You actually made out decent, Chunky.”

“His name is Hunk,” Allura insisted with a frown, rising to her feet beside Lotor. “And you’ll treat him with respect.”

Cossack bristled. Although he was used to paying lip service to royalty, it chafed at him to have the teenage princess of Arus, who was until recently their enemy, speak that way to him and be unable to put her in her place. “I’ll do my best to remember, Princess.” He went just light enough on the sarcasm to keep him out of trouble with Lotor.

Meanwhile, Hunk let out an incredulous snort. “Don’t expect much, he’s not the brightest bulb in Doom’s box.”

A second later, a pointed boot connected with Hunk's backside just out of Allura's view, who fortunately for Cossack was distracted away from the sight by Lotor, who in turn sneered down at Hunk. "You may have a point, but Cossack isn't the one insulting those in control of his fate. Incidentally, you're being given to Cossack as his sla—ward. It's up to him what happens to you."

Grinding the pointy toe in Hunk's rear end a bit before pulling it back to straighten his posture, Cossack then said to Allura, "Like I said, he'll be taken care of. You got my word, just like Prince Lotor."

Allura lowered her head, not exactly happy with the situation, but mollified enough to not press the issue further while Hunk closed his eyes, far less comforted by the notion of being Cossack's "ward" than Allura was expected to be. A satisfied smile spread across Lotor's face, and he put his arm around Allura's shoulders. "Come, Allura. There's no need for us to stay here any longer. Of course you understand that it's best that you and Hunk not be in contact with one another after this, now that you know he's fine, lest anything happen to compromise our security."

The prince's words cemented the dread gathering in the pit of Hunk's gut, while Allura stopped in her tracks. "Wait. No contact? But..."

"If anyone intercepted your communications, our asses would all be on the line," Cossack said bluntly, and then added as if to amend the breach of language etiquette, "your highness."

"But how will I know that he's still fine a week from now, a month, a year?" Allura pressed.

Lotor frowned at Allura's still obvious distrust of him. "We can see to it that you're kept informed that he's fine."

The princess was not fully swayed. "Regularly."

“Fine,” Lotor agreed, his irritation becoming more evident. “That’s not a problem, is it Cossack?”

“No, Sire.”

Lotor eyed Allura expectantly. “Is that good enough for you?”

The sharpness of his tone made her feel put on the spot. “Yes,” she said uncertainly, and looked to Hunk with a contrite expression. “I’m sorry Hunk... I—”

“Like I said, Princess, you do what you have to.” The former yellow lion pilot then looked away, unable to stand the look on Allura’s face any longer. He did not want to be angry with her, given their history of friendship and the kind of person he knew her to be in her heart, but with each passing moment it was becoming harder and harder to not hold the foolish decisions she had made that brought them all to where they were now against her. “Tell Pidge when you see him back on Arus that I wish the best for the little guy and the others, and I hope I see them again someday.”

“I will,” Allura promised, and then turned to Lotor. “Before we leave, Lotor, I need to know something else. What I saw, what your father and the Drule Empire and the whole Galaxy Alliance saw, Hunk’s execution...” Her voice faltered as she said the words, still shamed by her part in the charade, “if it wasn’t Hunk that died, who did? It didn’t look fake. I mean, I believed it was real...”

“A nobody. A slave,” Lotor told her. “One that bore an unfortunate resemblance to your friend.”

When he heard that someone else had been killed in his place, Hunk grimaced. Though he certainly did not want to die, it was little comfort to know that he had been spared just so someone else could be slaughtered instead. Allura meanwhile gasped, horrified. “You killed an innocent man?”

“Would you rather I broke my word to you and killed him instead?” Lotor asked incredulously.

“I’d rather you didn’t kill anyone!”

“Besides, he wasn’t innocent,” Cossack interjected. “He had it coming.”

Allura frowned at the commander. “What did he do?”

Cossack motioned for the robot that had brought Hunk out to take him back to his cell as he answered Allura. “He defiled one of my slave girls.”

“You mean he raped her?” she questioned, and then added, surprised, “You care about things like that with your slaves?”

Stifling a snort of laughter both at the notion that the naïve Arusian had apparently never considered that an “evil” Doomite could actually value slave property and at the actual truth of the situation, Cossack went on to explain. “Nah, he screwed her; she’s not discriminating enough to say no. But the loser gave her a hell of a case of the crabs so he had punishment coming anyway. It was just convenient that it worked out he looked kinda like Hunk.”

Aghast, Allura recoiled, immediately trying to banish unwanted images of Cossack forcing some hapless servant girl into his bed from her mind. “I’m not going to even ask how you’d find out such a thing.”

Cossack meanwhile raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying you *don’t* make it a point to find out if the servants that clean your toilet aren’t carrying anything contagious? Talk about putting your ass on the line!”

To that Allura's only response was a disgusted noise, while Lotor rolled his eyes at Cossack's complete lack of social decorum. "I think that we've gone over everything that needs to be said. It's been quite an exhausting day for all of us. Allura, let's retire to my chambers." Before she could object, the prince then ushered her out, leaving Cossack alone with Hunk and the robot, who had taken the former yellow lion pilot back into his cell.

When Cossack came into the cell, Hunk glowered at him. "Your 'ward' huh? Nice way to say 'slave' if I ever heard one."

"Well what do you know, you are smarter than you look!" Cossack quipped back in response. "That's good, maybe having a few brains'll get you out of the nastier jobs that you could get stuck with where you're going."

"Where I'm going?" Hunk repeated. Although Lotor and Cossack had told Allura he would not remain there, Hunk did not believe a word out of either of their mouths, so he was mildly surprised to hear Cossack say that he was indeed going elsewhere.

"Yeah." The commander flashed him an insincere fanged smile. "I know you're disappointed that you won't be in my personal collection of servants, but like we said out there, if you put two and two together, you'd figure out that someone would notice who you really were before long if you stayed around here. Not to mention, if you managed to catch up with your pal the princess, you two might hatch some stupid escape plot which would be a whole heap of trouble that I don't want to deal with. So like your look-alike crab-man, you gotta go."

Hunk flexed in his chains, forgetting his wounded leg for a moment. He then grimaced and groaned when a bolt of pain reminded him that he was overdue for his next dose of painkiller. "Where are you taking me?"

"Don't you worry about that, Chunky. The ride's on me. In fact, you won't remember much of it anyway."

“What do you mean?” Hunk asked, just as Cossack motioned to the robot behind him. When he turned around to see what was happening, Hunk looked up just in time to see a metallic arm come down on his head, knocking him to the ground in a fresh wave of pain.

As he lay on the floor trying to get his bearings, Hunk then overheard Cossack tell the robot, “Now shoot him up with a knockout dose of Delbinium, bag him, and get him into my cargo hold.”

Continued