

Necessary Masque by Cheezey
Part 3

When the battle-scarred red lion and tiger fighter arrived back on Pollux, the hour was late. Romelle, Sven, and Keith had all been getting some much-needed rest, while Niyte oversaw rescue efforts and communications that Romelle had delegated to him. There was no news yet of any change in Prince Bandor's condition, and the two space explorers and the princess had been so tired when a reasonable point to rest came that they had all fallen asleep within moments of hitting a soft surface. It had only been a few hours since then when the red lion and tiger fighter showed up, but Niyte sent a soldier to rouse them, as he had been ordered should any significant news from them come. The three of them, still groggy, gathered with Niyte in front of the two feline ships as Lance and Stride disembarked. The other survivor climbed out of his escape pod in the red lion's jaws and joined them.

"Lance!" Keith exclaimed, heading to his equally weary-looking friend's side. "You look like hell."

"I feel like it," he said darkly. "I can't believe those bastards did that..." He closed his eyes, fighting back a wave of emotion. "We tried to make it there on time, but we were too late." He looked at Keith, Sven, and Romelle. "God, I'm sorry."

Romelle gave him a sympathetic hug. "You aren't the one that has to be sorry, Lance. Lotor is. And Allura," she added bitterly.

Keith frowned at Romelle's harsh words for the other princess, but he did not argue them. He saw no point, especially since there was some truth in what she said, even though what had happened was something Allura never would have intended.

"We did our best," a somber Stride went on to say. "We were on our way there when they killed him. We and the others sought to avenge him, but the mission failed."

“The others?” Sven said, looking between the two of them.

“They didn’t make it either,” Lance said flatly. “The three of us are the only ones that made it.” He gestured to Stride and the other survivor. “Me and red lion may be what’s left of Voltron, but we don’t hold a candle to him, that’s for sure. We didn’t even dish out all that much damage to them either. They were waiting for us.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised at that. I’m sure they were expecting a rescue attempt,” Keith said with a sigh.

“Regardless Lance, it’s better that a part of Voltron is keeping up the fight than none at all,” Captain Niyte offered. “Anyone that stands up to Zarkon and his tyranny has the respect and support of the Galaxy Alliance and its worlds. You and your friends are heroes, living and dead.”

“Absolutely,” Romelle agreed. “And you’ll always be welcome here on Pollux.” She let out a sad sigh and looked up at the night stars. “I know it’s nothing compared to what he gave for us, but I’m going to see to it that a memorial to Hunk is erected here when we get things rebuilt, and to your friends who went to Doom to try and set things right.”

Niyte added, “The Galaxy Alliance feels similarly. My superiors told me that when a memorial is held, I’m to dignify him with special honors on their behalf, as a member of the Voltron Force and war hero.”

“I don’t know what we’d do without the Alliance’s support,” Romelle said gratefully. “Thank you.”

Stride straightened and put a hand on the sword at his side. “Your friend will not go unavenged. We’ll find a way to settle the score with Zarkon and Lotor.”

“Damn right we will,” Lance agreed, the fight and fire back in his tone. “And we’re not going to let them take Pollux.”

Sven frowned and glanced up at the sky, and then at the rubble of the former proud castle. “Which I’m sure they’ll be back to try before too long.”

“The Alliance already has battleships being sent this way for your protection,” Niyte told them. “Pollux is on the highest level of threat warning right now, and they’re putting as many resources as they can toward keeping it defended, especially given the loss of Voltron. We should be able to keep you reasonably safe while you rebuild your defenses.”

Keith looked at the red lion. “The red lion looks like it can still put up a good fight too.” He turned to Stride. “What about your ship?”

“The tiger fighter is fine. Fuel and minor repairs are all it needs.”

“Then you’ll have them,” Romelle assured, and turned to Niyte. “Can you help them with that?”

The captain nodded. “Of course, Princess. Anything you need, just ask.”

“Thank you. Since you bring it up, there is one other thing I would like to ask the Alliance, on behalf of Pollux.” She took a steady breath while the others faced her, waiting to hear what was on her mind. “I’ve done some thinking since all of this happened. These attacks happened for one reason—the Voltron Force bringing the red lion here because Lance wouldn’t turn it over to Doom.”

“To Allura,” Keith corrected her gently. “Not Doom.”

Romelle frowned. “She’s married to Lotor. You can’t separate them,” she argued before continuing. “Part of the agreement to be a part of the Galaxy Alliance is to remain at peace with your allies. Arus violated that when Lotor came to take that lion on behalf of Arus.”

“Allura didn’t put him up to that, Princess. You know she wouldn’t,” Keith insisted.

“There was a time when I’d have said I know she’d never have anything to do with Lotor either, but I was wrong,” she snapped back, angry and hurt. “I don’t like this any more than you do. I loved Allura like she was my own sister. I trusted her and respected her!” Tears filled Romelle’s eyes. “But she betrayed us. When she married Lotor, when she put him above the welfare of everyone in the Alliance, on the innocent worlds that he’s now got the means to attack now that Voltron can’t defend them...”

Keith looked away. “She didn’t give Lotor the lions. He hasn’t used the black, green, or yellow lions to attack anyone.”

Romelle’s scowl deepened. “She also didn’t give us the means to defend ourselves from her husband by allowing you to use them to help us. She didn’t stop him from coming after Lance and his lion, and she didn’t even stop him from murdering Hunk. How can you defend her?” Her words ended on an angry sob, which Sven sought to ease by putting his arm around her shoulder.

Letting out a weary sigh, Keith tried to find the words to counter Romelle’s argument, but found none. It was hard enough to reconcile in his own mind what had happened to Hunk at the hands of the man Allura willingly married, what had happened to all of them since the ill-advised union, to the Allura he knew in his heart to be a kind and gentle person. It was even harder when he had to hear someone else put the arguments against her into impassioned words with the ring of truth. “I don’t want to fight with you, Romelle. We’re on the same side.” He looked over at the silhouettes of the red lion and tiger fighter in the moonlight. “I said I support Pollux and the Alliance and I meant it. Whatever you decide, I’m with you and the Voltron Force.” *Or what’s left of it*, he thought wistfully, as memories of Allura, Hunk, and Pidge—who he wondered about how he must be faring once he heard the news about Hunk—came back to him.

“We know you are, Keith,” Sven said, giving Romelle’s shoulder a squeeze and his friend a smile in an effort to smooth things over. “This is hard on everyone.”

“Which is why we gotta set things as right as we can,” Lance agreed.

NiYTE nodded, also in agreement. “There’s a strong case for having Arus removed from the Alliance for breaching their peace agreement. If there’s sufficient evidence that Princess Allura condones attacks on fellow Alliance worlds, either through direct orders to or deliberate inaction against her husband, I can’t imagine the Alliance being willing to keep Arus.”

Stride frowned. “The Arusian people are the ones that will feel the pain of that the most.”

“They have Lotor and their lions to defend them,” Romelle said bitterly. “Hopefully Allura at least had the sense to demand that much for her people.”

“I hope so too,” Keith said. He thought again of his friends on Arus and in the Castle of Lions.

“As do I,” Stride said. “I knew King Alfor and his family well. It would grieve him greatly to see devastation come to his world by the actions of his own flesh and blood.” He paused to think for a moment. “Perhaps I could go to Arus and speak to Queen Orla—the princess’ aunt. I don’t know her as well as I did Alfor and his wife, but I’ve met her and she was a respectable and honorable woman. I’m sure I could find out from her how the people of Arus are being treated, and if your friends, such as the green lion pilot that stayed there, are all right.”

Keith’s dark eyes lit up with a bit of optimism. “That would be great.”

“Yeah, definitely. Especially considering we’re banned from the planet by Lotor,” Lance said.

“What about you?” Sven asked the red lion pilot. “Are you staying here with us?”

Lance resumed a more somber demeanor. “I don’t know. I want to be able to defend you guys if you need me, but I also make you more of a target since Lotor wants this lion so badly. And now that the GA is here, I wonder if I shouldn’t be doing more while I lay low and do something to make sure the lion stays in prime shape.”

Romelle eyed him questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“The red lion’s home is a volcano on Arus. The lava recharges it. I need to find somewhere hot for it to rest now that it can’t go back to Arus. Its power is still good, but I don’t know for how long. I was thinking of going back to talk to Marianne and going from there to figure out how to keep the red lion going, or even make it stronger, now that it’s running alone without the others.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Keith agreed. “We never really put it to the test how long the lions would last without resting in their original places. And that time the lake dried up, it didn’t take long for the blue lion to run down at all.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Lance said with a nod. “I’m glad you guys are on board with it.”

Niyte looked toward his own ship thoughtfully. “We should be able to manage without the red lion for a time with the reinforcements I’ve called in.”

“I think it’s a good idea, Lance,” Sven also agreed. “Good luck.”

“Be safe. And please keep in touch with us,” Romelle urged him.

Lance smiled back at his friends, feeling the first hint of hope that he had since he had first heard the news of Hunk's demise. "Will do."

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Lotor ended the silence that had fallen between him and Allura on their way back to his suite in Castle Doom as soon as he closed the heavy doors behind him. "What is it, Allura?" he demanded, commanding her attention with his tone. "You haven't said a word."

"Honestly, I don't know what to say," she replied, her tone quiet and distant.

"'I'm sorry' might be a nice start," he retorted with heavy sarcasm.

The princess' eyes went wide with shock and a bit of indignant pride. "What?"

"For not trusting me. For jumping to the worst conclusions about me. For doubting my love when I prove it over and over again, Allura. I don't know what it takes to satisfy you. Even when I do what you ask, and put myself on the line for you..."

She sighed. "If you hadn't attacked Pollux, you wouldn't have had to put yourself or me or Hunk on the line to begin with."

"I told you that we had to retaliate after Bandor balked us," an increasingly exasperated Lotor replied. "You said when I left for that mission that you understood that."

"You said you'd see to it that no one innocent was hurt and that the attack wouldn't be 'unreasonable'!" she argued back, her voice rising with emotion. "Tell me how destroying Castle Pollux, killing so many people, and almost killing Bandor isn't unreasonable!"

Lotor took hold of his bedpost and squeezed it to absorb his pent up frustration so he would not lash out at the woman he was trying so desperately to appease. It galled him to do so, and a part of him felt weak for letting a mere human princess dictate his actions so. Fortunately for Allura, his love won out over his ego, although the battle was close and constant, it seemed. “Prince Bandor and his guardsmen and soldiers aren’t ‘innocents’, they’re military casualties. I know they’re your friends, but *they* are the antagonists. They refused to hand over the lion or Lance, and they balked our peaceful attempts to communicate. I kept my word for the precious ‘innocent’ you hold so dear—no towns or villages were attacked, and the orders were out for the soldiers to not shoot at any civilian that did not shoot first.” He left out that such orders were carried down the chain of command and that he did not follow up to see if his subordinate officers enforced them. That was not his problem.

Allura’s expression softened a bit, although a disapproving look remained in her eyes. “But why were you so brutal? Why did you have to destroy the castle?”

“You obviously have little understanding of Drule Empire protocol.” He turned away to pour himself a goblet of wine from the flask slaves had previously made ready in his room.

The condescending response caught Allura off guard. “I—well—I know the Drules are more aggressive than Alliance worlds are, but—”

He faced her with a bold look, and then took a drink from his goblet. “That’s putting it mildly.” He gestured for Allura to help herself to the wine, but she shook her head in refusal. He then took another drink and continued to explain. “Weakness is not tolerated in any way, shape, or form by a Drule kingdom ruler. Anything less than what we did to Pollux would have been construed as a slap on the wrist, a signal to other worlds that we’re willing to back down to worlds that try to take what is ours. Making the ramifications of defying us clear is the only way to keep the respect of the other Drule rulers. Once you show weakness,” Lotor stared down at her intensely, “they get the idea that if an enemy world can intimidate you, so can they. And you don’t want them getting that idea. Not unless you want to be treated like a conquered world yourself—which you might very well be, for an ambitious ruler looking to usurp a kingdom. The Council will back up whoever is most powerful and who will net them the most benefit. Don’t *ever* think otherwise of any of your peer rulers in the Empire.”

“I see.” She looked away, her eye catching the empty goblet beside the flask that her husband was already refilling. She wondered if something in the drink calmed him, or it was the pleasure of the taste that brought him relief. Allura herself did not want any; when she consumed alcohol it was in small quantities. She had been brought up that a proper lady of royal bearing stopped at the first sense of being “tipsy” as Nanny called it, lest she lose self-control and act in an unbecoming way or grow ill.

“Do you? Do you understand, Allura?” Lotor’s golden eyes met hers with an impatient and was it—hurt?—need for an answer.

As she looked back to him, Allura found herself empathizing on some level with Lotor. Although she could not fathom the way he thought and acted, she could certainly identify with being placed in a hard position that forced her hand into difficult, even dangerous, decisions. “Yes,” she said earnestly. “I won’t lie and tell you that I approve of what you did... but I understand why you did it. Just please, please remember how much my friends mean to me. Always. If there’s any way...”

“I’ll try to remember your feelings and spare them, Allura, you have my word on that,” Lotor vowed, taking a step closer to her. “Hurting you hurts me as well.”

She found herself drawn into his intense gaze as he set his goblet down and drew her close. She did not fight the embrace, but she did not know what to say either, so she only murmured his name. “Oh, Lotor.”

The prince took it as encouragement and stroked her hair, tied in a neat bun at the back of her head, before tipping her chin up toward his face for a kiss.

To his dismay, she withdrew and turned away. “I don’t think I’m ready for this.”

Lotor frowned. “Not ready? For the loving kiss of your husband?”

“This isn’t the right time for something like this,” she protested.

“You talk as though we haven’t been intimate and consummated our marriage, Allura.” Lotor released her from his embrace but not his gaze. “Surely you can’t be nervous about what you’ve already experienced and enjoyed as my wife?”

Sighing, she stepped back and undid her hair from the bun, his recent touch reminding her that it would feel more relaxing to take it down, especially in the cool stone chamber in which they were going to spend the night. “It’s not that, not exactly,” she explained. “It just doesn’t feel right after everything that happened today, to do... that. Expressions of love between a husband and wife should be special moments.”

Dismayed at the rebuff, Lotor’s frown deepened. “You think that I would not treat you as though you were special, or that it would be meaningless to me?” He paused. “Or are you saying it’s meaningless to you?”

“That isn’t what I’m saying at all!” Allura protested. Her face flushed as she searched for polite words to discuss the personal subject, one that she was used to viewing as something romantic and far off in her future, free of complications. “I just meant that things like that should be for special times, when we want to celebrate our love. Not when we’ve just gotten finished talking about the kind of things that’ve happened the last couple of days.”

“Oh,” Lotor said flatly. “Then what about our wedding night, Allura? Surely the jailbreak and rescue was far from your romantic ideal?”

“It was our wedding night,” she said, her cheeks reddening further. “We were supposed to—”

“You gave yourself to me out of obligation,” he said stonily. “Romantic indeed.”

Allura bit her lip. “You make it sound so cold, Lotor. It’s not like you forced me to—to consummate our marriage. I did it willingly.” She paused and then added, “And I enjoyed it.”

“Of course you did,” Lotor replied with an air of arrogance, and looked at his bride with mixed emotion. She frustrated him so terribly. While he wanted her love more than anything and it angered him to hear that she had given herself to him in bed more out of duty than lust, it still gave the part of him so eager for her affection hope to hear her say that it had not been something she regretted. “You could enjoy many more nights, including tonight, if you’d open your mind beyond your storybook romance ideals.”

“What?”

He took her by the hand and drew her into his arms again. “What I mean, Allura, is that if you’d be willing to cast aside these pre-conceived notions that your guardians have given you about what goes on between a man and his wife, that you’d realize that giving one another pleasure and enjoying affection isn’t something that needs to wait for the ideal moment, or some special occasion. There’s no shame in desiring my touch even if I made you angry.” He traced his finger along the side of her cheek. “Pleasure is a gift I’m willing to give you whenever you want it.”

“I—” Lotor cut her off with a firm but tender kiss. That time she did not push him away, and found herself enjoying his strong embrace and the faint taste of wine imparted by his lips.

“Having you tonight, having you love me after all we went through to get this far, making love to you would put a perfect end on this otherwise draining day,” Lotor whispered, smoothing his hands along the outline of her hips, fingers brushing ever-so-slightly against her buttocks.

Allura felt a terrible conflict of desire for the man holding her so delightfully, who had done so many things she found unconscionable, but who also seemed to love her with a depth and passion she was only beginning to comprehend. The more he touched her, the more he murmured affection to her and caressed her in that embrace, the more she wanted to yield to him, to lay with him on that plush bed and have him do those delicious things he had done and make her feel the way he had made her feel on their wedding night.

“Lotor,” she whispered. Her breath caught as he simultaneously kissed the tip of her ear and kneaded her rump in a way that made her both blush and burn with desire.

She felt his hips grind against hers, a noticeable bulge in his clothing that teased her with what it represented, and met his eyes as he studied her face intently. “Allura, I only want you tonight if you want me. Tell me you want me to make love to you, and I’ll revere you, make you feel like the beautiful goddess that you are.” His fingers then tightened around her upper arms where they had stopped in their caresses. “But if you truly don’t want me tonight, say so, and I’ll slake my lust with a slave and leave you in peace.”

The passion of his words at first enticed her, and then struck her with force in their brutal honesty. She supposed she was getting what she asked for by demanding he be honest with her, and the notion of taking a slave if she said no was still fidelity in his eyes. It was an odd concept to her, but she supposed it made sense in the same way most of Lotor’s twisted logic did. His last statement did not come without a pang of jealousy, either, and it made her realize that she was coming to not only truly care—she would not call it *love* yet—for Lotor, but genuinely desire him. The thought shamed her a bit as she imagined Nanny and Coran’s disapproval, but not enough to make her deny it. She *did* want Lotor, even though by all rights she should not. *Arus help me, I do.*

“Yes, Lotor,” she told him, blue eyes looking deeply into his alien ones. She leaned closer.

Lotor smiled. “Say it then, Allura. Tell me that you want me. That you desire me. That you want me to love you like your adoring husband.” *That you want me to make you cry my name in pleasure all night.* He left the last bit unsaid, but thought it, and smiled just a bit wider as he did.

Trembling, Allura said, “I do want you, Lotor.”

“And you’ll have me,” the smug Lotor replied, and pulled her onto the bed to make good on his word.

* * *

While Lotor and Allura enjoyed the luxury of sleeping in the following morning, Cossack the Terrible did not share the same fortune. The commander was awakened by a most unwelcome cold and wet sensation splattering upon his face.

“What the—?” He sat bolt upright, his initial shock from being jolted from a pleasant rest changing to an aggravated scowl as he heard a childish giggle to his left. He wiped his fingers across his face and glowered in the direction of his unwanted wake-up caller, his wife’s five-year-old grandson Prestus, who was brandishing a water gun. “What’s the big idea, kid?”

The boy’s laughter died to a snicker. “You jumped like a space mouse.”

“And you’re gonna flail like one in a trap if you ever do something like that again and I get a hold of you!” the grumpy Cossack retorted, rising to his feet to stare his wife’s grand-spawn down. The commander did not look nearly as imposing as he would have liked to imagine, wearing nothing but his lucky boxers and waving his fist at the boy, but Prestus skittered back toward the door nonetheless.

“Yeah, you better run!” Cossack shouted after him, waving his fist. He picked up his helmet off the nightstand and put it on. “You don’t screw with Cossack the Terrible before coffee, kid!”

That proved enough to startle Prestus into a full retreat, and without even a squeak of apology, the boy and his water weapon fled the suite. “Brat,” Cossack muttered under his breath. Although normally he would have found such a prank amusing, the key factors of it being him that was the victim and it being far too early to be up the morning after a celebration colored his opinion heavily. He yawned, began hunting for his clothes, and sighed. “Guess I ought to be up anyway.”

As he dressed, Cossack mulled over his plans for the day, that being to tie up the final loose end of Lotor’s deception before heading back to Castle Doom. He headed downstairs to say goodbye to Kuryaki, who it seemed had risen sometime before him. As it turned out he had barely spent

any time with her the previous evening; the celebratory dinner he had arrived at later than expected due to Lotor's orders went on until well after midnight, and although he had enjoyed the fine food and drink, she had been interested in little else than sleep by the time they turned in.

Still, he had not expected the frosty reception he received from her when he met up with her in the room where they normally took breakfast. Kuryaki eyed him with a stern look of disapproval when he approached. "Cossack."

"Hey," he responded, frowning as he took note of her expression and tone. "What's wrong?"

"That was uncalled for."

He blinked as he tried to figure out what she was talking about. "Huh?"

Kuryaki took a few steps closer. "Prestus. There was no reason on Doom to rattle him like that! The poor boy was nearly white with fear when he came to me!"

"What?" the puzzled Cossack said, until he realized that the kid must have gone crying to her after he yelled at him. "Yeesh, I only told him not to mess with me, and believe me, he had it coming. He shot me in the face with a water gun while I was asleep! Am I supposed to think that's cute?"

"No, but there's no need to go overboard with him. He is only five."

Cossack rolled his eyes. "Five's old enough to know not to piss off guys four times your size. And it's not like I said I'd gut and disembowel him. Lighten up." *If he's that much of a pansy, he's got more problems than me* anyway, he thought irritably.

“That’s not how he painted it, but perhaps imagination did overwhelm him,” Kuryaki conceded, and then added on a sterner note, “Though I would appreciate you not chasing him into the west wing in the future. You know I don’t like anyone in there without my supervision.”

That time Cossack mirrored his wife’s frown, although his was more confused than anything else. He picked up a breakfast pastry and began to munch. “The west wing? Baby, what are you talking about? I just chased him out of the bedroom. I wasn’t anywhere near the west wing.” The west wing was the part of the manor that held the rooms that had once belonged to Yurak, and just as Kuryaki still clung bitterly to the memory of her fallen son, she was also a hawk-like caretaker of that part of the Tonorm’oith estate house.

The two of them eyed each other in silence for a moment, until Kuryaki broke it with a dismissive wave. “Well he told me that the commander chased him out of the hall from behind the Athgar statue and threatened him. I presume that would be you, being the only commander in the house and all, unless your Terrorberbil has taken up a full command?” The robear servant she named was a Berbil that catered to Cossack’s needs when he was at the house. It wore a fleet helmet and had been dubbed the “Terrorberbil” in fun. “And the only full size Athgar icon is in the west wing,” she continued. “It belonged to Sevakor and Yurak kept it after he passed.”

Cossack gave a shrug, irritated by Kuryaki’s insistence that he had upset her precious Prestus in a place he had not even been. “Well I don’t know what the kid told you, but I wasn’t there. All I did was holler at him and tell him he should’ve run. I didn’t think he’d wet himself over that. Maybe he got confused when he was crying to you,” he grouched and then added, “and maybe you ought to talk to your daughter about her kid being such a mama’s boy if that freaked him out so badly.”

“I don’t think Sekavi shelters him that much. Regardless, I don’t want him in the west wing unsupervised,” she said with a note of finality, and then sighed. “Just please refrain from threatening the lives of the next generation in the future. I understand children have their moments, but really, the threat of a good whipping works wonders on both slaves and children. No need to go overboard.”

“Yes dear.” His response was as sarcastic as it was conciliatory, as it was clear that her mind was made up and arguing with her would only result in him continuing to get griped at.

“Thank you.” Kuryaki offered him a smile of truce, and then looked him over. “You’re in uniform. Are you off to Castle Doom again so soon?”

Cossack nodded. “Got a few things to take care of, yeah. And I don’t know how soon they’re going to want us to gear up for a retaliation on Pollux.”

His response disappointed her. “I thought you said last night you’d have a few days off, that Prince Lotor promised you himself?”

“Yeah, but you know how the royals operate. Everything’s contingent upon everything else.” He smiled enough to show the tips of his fangs. “Shouldn’t be more than a week or so.”

“Good. I hope to see you then.” She leaned close and kissed him on the cheek, which mildly disappointed him.

“Aw, that’s it? After I got to parade the dead body of a Voltron Force pilot around town? How about a real kiss?” He then pulled her close and planted a dramatic smooch on her lips before she had a chance to answer. Afterward she smoothed down her dress and bade him a pleasant goodbye, and shortly thereafter Cossack was out at his transport craft, the irritation of his morning already put behind him. He kicked the back end of the craft loudly before he boarded, chortling at a squirming and mumbling mass tied up in a tarp in the back as he came in. “Ah, be happy that I didn’t stick you in the trunk with the junk, Hunk!” he greeted his secret charge cheerfully, and then snickered at his own wit. “Hey, that rhymed!”

He powered on the engines and then went over to give the sack a personal kick, which responded with a louder and more aggravated grunt. It was all Hunk could do through the binds and gag he wore, especially in the dark and still feeling the last of the effects of the painkillers he had been given to both manage the pain of his leg and to sedate him for easy transport.

“I ought to make you work off the lazon mileage your fat ass is causing on my transport. But I guess they’ll get it out of you where you’re going,” Cossack said as he sat in the pilot seat and took off. It was only a short ride to their ultimate destination, a palatial but secluded estate in the

heart of planet Doom's only fertile agricultural region near its equator. The manor and its gardens were nestled amidst Doom grape fields as far as the eye could see all around, and the world's cloudy sky was brighter there than in it was in the higher rocky ground to the north where Castle Doom stood. "Welcome to your new home," Cossack told the trussed-up Voltron pilot after they touched down. "Now before I introduce you to your new masters, I'm gonna go over a few things with you. First of all, make sure you understand me and understand me good." He prodded Hunk's side with the pointy toe of his boot in a not-so-gentle manner to drive the point home. "We both know you're only here because Princess Allura wants you kept alive and safe, but don't think that this far from Castle Doom that gives you any kind of license to act up or cause trouble. Because if you do anything to these fine people, you're going to find out just how far Pinky's influence *doesn't* reach. We faked your death; don't think we can't fake your life too." He kicked him again. "Got it?"

When no response other than a muffled groan came from the sack, Cossack continued. "Good. Now I better not hear any reports that you're giving your new masters trouble, slave, and believe me, I *will* find out if you do. And it goes without saying that you'll be sorry." He opened the door of the craft and proceeded to drag the heavy bundle that was Hunk out. "Ugh. I hope the hard labor in the grape fields takes a few pounds off you. I thought dead weight was a pain in the ass; live is worse."

"Cossack!" a familiar feminine voice greeted him with enthusiasm. "Oh my Terrible Terror, what a nice surprise!"

Once he reached the bottom of the ramp Cossack released Hunk and smiled warmly at the woman who greeted him, Lady Visycka of house Aldar'ach. "Hey Mom! Good to see you!"

Visycka drew her eldest son into a hug and then let him go, peering curiously at the oddly shaped and squirming sack he had brought with him. "And what is this?"

"A present." He grinned. "For you and Dad and the rest of the house, courtesy of your son the fleet commander. A token of Doom's recent victory!"

"It's moving," she observed. "Something from Pollux?"

Cossack bent over and untied the drawstring binding the tarp, allowing it to fall down around Hunk's bulk. The former yellow lion pilot was still bound and gagged, and obviously none too pleased even if he did welcome the breath of fresh, albeit humid and hot, air. "Better," Cossack went on to explain, presenting Hunk like an auctioneer would a prime parcel for sale. "A strong slave. But not just any slave, one with unique humor value." Visycka raised an eyebrow at that, rightfully wary of what her son considered humorous, but allowed him to continue. Cossack leaned closer to his mother and said with a smirk, "He thinks he's that dead Voltron Force pilot we executed yesterday. We caught him on Pollux, and he's been going on to other slaves and us and anyone that'll listen that he's the *real* yellow lion pilot, like we'd be dumb enough to mix up someone who'd been a pain in our asses for years or something with some stupid Pollux castle guard. Totally nuts, but funny." The commander accentuated his tale with a "cuckoo" finger gesture. "I figured you and Dad could not only use him in the fields, but for entertaining. I'll give him credit, for a screwball he talks a good game; listen to him long enough and he weaves a tale of bullshit so good you might almost believe it." He chuckled. "But of course he's not, no matter how much he wants to think he is. And with him at your parties, you'll be a trend-setter in the Drule Empire with your own personal Voltron Clown."

Visycka laughed lightly and looked over her new acquisition, who was astonished that Cossack not only fabricated such a bold lie, but that it was readily believed as well. "Amusing indeed," the Doom woman said. "You do have your father's sense of humor, don't you? Good thing you got your looks from *my* side at least." She smirked and then bent over to examine Hunk more closely, pinching his arm as she did so, eliciting a resentful glower from him. "Strong human though. He'll be good in the fields. What's his name?"

"He won't answer to anything but 'Hunk', though he might turn around if you call him 'fatso' or something else. No idea what his real name is—the slaves just called him by the dead pilot's name. I think he might've convinced one or two of 'em he was the real thing." He shook his head. "Not too bright over there on Pollux."

"Well I hear all that ancestry is rather inbred in those humans anyway. Hopefully our prince will inject some much needed fresh strong blood into that shallow gene pool with his pretty little princess from Arus." Visycka shrugged. "As for 'Hunk' here, as long as he does what he's told, we can call him Frinky Fancypants for all I care." She motioned to the bandages on his leg. "What happened there? Permanent damage?"

Hunk let out increasingly more indignant mutters through his gag, although none of it was understandable to either of the Doomites, who ignored his attempts to speak anyway while Cossack answered his mother. “Nah. Just an accident. Like I said before, he’s bonkers and takes this whole ‘I’m the lost hero of the Voltron Force’ bit way too seriously. That’s kinda why I thought he’d be a good fit here with you and Dad, both the whole novelty of a nutty pilot thing and all the open space to keep him from doing anything too stupid. He’s too funny to waste, but around too many slaves with rebellious thoughts he does start trouble and spreads his craziness. Like this one skinny guy started calling himself ‘Didge’ like that green lion pilot, but didn’t even get his name right.”

Nodding as she listened, Visycka said, “And the leg?”

“Oh yeah, right. When he heard that the real Hunk when we captured him got shot in the leg, this guy butted his leg up against a lazon unit to match it, like he was trying to feel his pain or something.” The commander shook his head again. “Like I said, cra-zy!”

Visycka poked at Hunk’s bandage, making him flinch, not so much out of pain but rather with anxiety for what awaited him in her care. “Can he work like that?”

“He can walk,” Cossack assured her. “I just had him tied up like this for easy transport. I had medics keep an eye on it as soon as I earmarked him for you and Dad. Just keep him on Delbinium until it heals and in no time he’ll be healthy as a Tyrusian horse. He’ll probably eat like one too. That’s one thing he really does have in common with that chunky pilot.”

Hunk grumbled something unflattering at Cossack through the gag while Visycka nodded in acknowledgment. “Very well. There’s plenty of light duty he can perform around the manor until it’s healed up. The maids will like a strong-shouldered brute like this when it comes time to clean under the sofas.” She patted him on the back like one would a pet and then motioned to a servant woman that stood nearby. “Nadina!”

“Yes Mistress?” The slave, a tanned human past her middle age with salt-and-pepper hair tied into a tight bun, bowed before Visycka.

“Take our new slave here inside and show him to the slave quarters. Find Brul and have him assist him today and show him the ropes. He’s injured, so give him Delbinium if he complains of pain. Let me know if he’s rebellious and I’ll have Roqis handle it,” Visycka ordered, naming first one of her more trusted domestic house slaves and then their disciplinarian. Roqis was a Doomite commoner, a particularly savage one that was hired help rather than a slave, and therefore was feared by the other workers of the household.

Nadina nodded obediently. “Yes, Mistress.” She took Hunk’s still-bound hands and gave them a tug. “Come along now. There’s no use being stubborn.”

“Nadina’s a smart one, Hunk,” Visycka told her new slave pointedly. “You’d be wise to listen to her. Behave, and you’ll avoid lashings or worse, and you might even get a reward. Act up, and the thunder of Elichi himself will come down on you.”

Stubbornly Hunk remained where he sat on the ground, despite Nadina tugging on him. Cossack did not appreciate his display of rebelliousness, even though he had expected it, and kicked him in the rump with the pointed toe of his boot. “I know you’re not deaf, tubbo, and you’re not that dumb, so get moving.”

Visycka let out a sigh of impatience and grabbed Hunk’s wrists, helping her weaker slave hoist Hunk unwillingly to his feet. “All right then, if you’re going to be this way you can wear your binds and gag all the way to the slave quarters.” She then brushed her hands together as if to wipe off the effort of the menial chore. “Take him away, Nadina, and see to it that he gets a bath. He’s a bit ripe.” She wrinkled her nose.

The servant gave an obedient nod and led the less than willing Hunk off. The defeated pilot cast an angry glare over his shoulders in the direction of Cossack and his new mistress. The commander found it amusing and grinned back. “Have a nice day!” he called back, giving a sarcastic wave. When Hunk then turned away, glowering in disgust and muttering curses at him through his gag, Cossack decided that even if Hunk did not—*especially* if Hunk did not—he certainly would.

The End