

To Know Is Not Enough by Otlal3
Chapter 12: A Lion Falls – Part II

Author's Chapter Notes:
WEP owns Voltron. Rated R

It was a rare occasion that Hunk's stomach churned the way it did as he sat in Yellow Lion on the night of Lance's birthday. This was their first real battle against Doom forces without Keith, and Hunk wasn't convinced they were ready for it. He turned on his view screen and saw the other four lions flying in formation with him, but it brought little comfort. Not usually the nervous type, tonight there was something in the air that made him tense. Throwing a new commander into the mix was troublesome to him and had become even more so as the weeks wore on and her quirks came to light. She was a decent pilot with a real flair for evasive tactics, but her propensity for barking inane strategic orders had Hunk particularly concerned. He had watched Lance and the commander spend hours hashing out the details of Voltron strategy, and Hunk knew that Keith had drilled them into her as well, but in some ways it appeared she just wasn't getting it. It all made Hunk rather uncomfortable. He took a deep breath and groaned like a mighty bear, hoping his uncertainty with the new commander was simply a product of his deep loyalty to Keith – a loyalty that no one on the team knew about or understood, especially the captain himself.

Pidge sat restless in his lion as the team sliced through the night air. He wasted little time worrying about the abilities of his new commander as his focus was elsewhere. Ever the eager teenager, his most recent weapon feature in Green Lion was something he was particularly proud of. His legs jumped with adrenaline and he rubbed his knees with excitement. It had been a long time since they fought a robeast and Pidge wanted nothing more than to crush it with his dust claws.

The lions rode smoothly in the air, skipping over frequent turbulence with ease as the altitudinal winds blew fiercely. Allura concentrated on her lion, observing monitors and feeling each small bump and sway. Sometimes she was entranced by the noises and constant roar of her progress through the sky as though it were a melody sung to soothe her. She felt a glowering sense of irony that the moments she felt most free were the same moments she approached a battle for the freedom of her planet. It was a cruel juxtaposition, but she couldn't let go of her full heart as she approached the heavens in her mighty lion. Allura felt her stomach flip as she thought about being grounded. It was only the other night that the new commander had pulled the princess aside and insisted she not become romantically involved with any of the team or she would be grounded. Allura was still puzzled over this assertion, unsure of its provocation. Was her commander astute enough to see the love well up in Allura's eyes as Keith touched her in his farewell so many months ago? If she had, Allura was certain Keith's absence made the whole issue a moot point. No matter, the exchange with Waters had left a sour taste in Allura's mouth and her regard for the commander was faltering.

Commander Waters sat calmly in her position at the head of the Voltron Force, comfortable in the majestic confines of the Black Lion. The metal interior glowed as though freshly dusted and shined with the most fastidious care. It smelled of a new car, untouched by warfare or the markings of its former captain. This was now her craft. Still, Waters had fleeting moments of apprehension, revealed in her childhood habit of nail-biting. She was in charge of this team and victory on her very first battle against an evil empire was essential to her own psyche. She had waited years for this opportunity – the chance to be a fighter pilot – and this was where she could finally apply the hours of studying strategic combat training. Perhaps her team was made of veteran pilots with ample flight time, but she was confident her book-smarts would outshine any ace, and lead this team to a speedy victory. Why else would she have been selected to step in as commander of the Voltron Force with so little combat experience under her belt?

The team remained quiet until a muffled humming pushed through the silence, clicking between the static from their consoles voice speakers. Waters flipped her monitor between the team members, each lost in their own thoughts and seemingly unperturbed by the odd noise. And then her screen showed the distinct face of Lance. His lips were moving as though in quiet prayer, his eyes actively scanning the sky before him. Waters raised the volume on her console and was greeted with a peppy melody driven by the sweet precise notes of Lance's voice.

“Woaaaaould ya like to swing on a staaaar? Carry mooonbeams home in a jar. Aaaaaand be bet-ter off than you aaaaare! Or would you rather be a Drule?” A faint smile met the commander's lips as she found herself continually surprised by her lieutenant, the one belting out an ancient tune as kind on the ears as Frank Sinatra himself.

Lance was the first to spot the glimmering red pod that housed their latest challenge. He calmly locked in his target seeker and scanned the surrounding area for adjacent heat cells. Red Lion was equipped with infrared sensors more powerful than the others, except for Black Lion, but he liked to lock in before old Blacky had a chance to do its thing. There had been an unspoken competition between Lance and Keith to be the first to scan. Keith had always shrugged it off whenever Lance beat him to it, but Lance kept a running tally, knowing that having the upper hand might be useful later. However, the drive for him was different without Keith around. It was no longer about friendly competition with his best friend and captain. It was now all about preserving the lives of his team and the people of Arus. Lance grumbled at the realization that this burden was now his, as he had no desire to test the new commander's ability to shoulder the weight of battle.

“Thar she blows, maties. Ten o' clock, my time. No other heat cells in the area. You guys ready to go swinging on a star?” Lance asked, his voice hovering in anticipation.

“Yeah!” Hunk, Pidge and Allura simultaneously shouted. Lance had inducted them into his standard battle cry long ago, and now only the delayed exclamation of Waters betrayed the lack of camaraderie within the Voltron Force.

The lions circled the robeast and Waters grimaced at the menacing face with beady eyes throbbing in front of her. She could hear it whirring with anger, a groan like the steady wind on a high mountain peak.

“I’m going in!” she yelled as Black Lion dove at one of the many flailing arms. Waters shifted in her seat on impact, the grinding of her lion’s teeth making her shiver. Black Lion’s head swung left and right in an attempt to break off the arm, but instead the telescoping appendage extended around the lion’s chest and tossed it into the air. Waters groaned and her stomach lurched as she and her craft tumbled through space. *Must. Stabilize.* She pulled on the controls and felt Black Lion level out. In a flash she headed back to the battle.

“That was pretty ballsy, Commander. If you ask me, it had ‘rookie’ written all over it,” Lance poked at Waters.

Shit! Does he know? Waters felt her face stiffen with guilt.

“You’re allowed one mess up like that, boss. This is about team work,” Hunk instructed the commander with a note of apprehension. Someone had to tell her that solo attacks were generally ineffective against Haggar’s beasts. She most definitely was a Voltron rookie.

“Hunk, we’re officers not accountants! I’d prefer you call me Commander.” Waters had to maintain authority and Hunk was her target.

Lance smiled at Hunk through the view screen, and the big guy shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

“No time for formality, BOSS! I’m going after the chest. You guys flank me and control those irritating octopussy legs, would ya?” Lance said as he thrust Red Lion into the writhing chest of the beast. The lion took hold and gnawed on circuitry like a predator savoring the juices of a fresh kill. Lance scanned his peripheral screens and saw the other lions blasting and slashing at rabid arms. Lance slashed Red Lion’s claws deeper into the heart of the beast, knowing that he had the upper hand. He wondered if this would be an easy kill, one of those rare occasions when Voltron wasn’t really needed. As he sat with this thought a pulsing light coursed through Red Lion and they were thrown from the robeast. Lance stiffened as jolting heat coursed through him and he struggled to pull the rigid lion machine into action. None of his controls flexed under his grip and he could think of only one solution.

“Hunk!” Lance yelled, his teeth clenched. “Muscle your lion around and shoot the bastard!”

Hunk used his brawn to slowly maneuver Yellow Lion to face the robeast and his forehead beaded sweat with the effort. Jolts of energy fought him and each muscle twitched as he pulled and twisted at the controls. Remembering the pain diversion technique Keith had taught him, he purposely bit down on his own tongue and he welcomed the sudden relief. As he met the beast face to face, Hunk forced a smile and pushed the missile launch button. Instantly the pain stopped as muscles and machinery loosening with an audible sigh.

“Looks like you really pissed him off, Hunk!” Pidge hollered, steadying his lion in a rush.

“Uh oh! I think it’s time to give this guy a break – with a blazing sword, perhaps!” Allura said slyly. Lance loved it when she spoke in allegory – it brought reassurance that he was indeed having some influence on her after all.

“Let’s form Voltron then!” Lance shot up into the deeper stretches of darkness above, expecting his team mates to follow. But instantly he heard the voice of Waters contradict the instinct that drove him.

“No! We’re not ready. Lieutenant, return to your attack post and shoot all you’ve got at this beast. You did some damage to his mechanisms – look at how sluggishly he moves. We can take him as the lions and conserve energy.” Waters’ instructions crackled between the guttural moans of the robeast, its arms continuing to grapple at the lions. They dodged and moved through the chaos of tentacles and Lance became livid.

“Waters, this guy is armed with a bio-electric pulse! Thanks to Hunk we escaped its first blast, but these things are capable of serving more than one. It’s sluggish because it’s building up energy for the next one. We NEED to form Voltron!” Lance slammed his hand against his armrest and frowned into the screen.

“I said no. I am in charge here, Lieutenant. You cross me one more time and I will have you grounded under official charges of insubordination!”

Lance seethed in his seat but remained quiet. All he had were words of contempt and the knowledge that she had the power to screw with his career. All communications went silent and the team fragmented their fight against the robeast. Waters commanded intermittent strategies to the team but their cohesion was splintered with the threat that had been spewed directly at Lance, and indirectly to them all.

Allura felt very alone, despite the efforts of her friends around her. She blasted through arms and the space between them, aiming her weapons at any opening she found. Green Lion flashed by her, aiming for the chest of the robeast, and she twisted to offer Pidge cover as he pursued his target. But as she banked to the side, a groping arm plucked her from the air and her cockpit lit white with the electricity pumped from the robeast. She screamed as her body zapped and sizzled, and her nostrils filled with the sourness of burning hair. She stretched to find the controls but her arms were bound by crooked wands of light and she stiffened in agony. The robeast released her in a great heave toward the ground and Blue Lion tumbled downward. As her body relaxed from the confines of electricity, she once again reached for the controls. Her fingertips neared the console and a force of stored power burned through her hands. Allura tightened as the probing surge of energy moved down her body in a wave. By the time the jolt exited through her feet, the princess was unconscious and falling uncontrollably toward the dark horizon of Arus.

“Princess!” Pidge’s voice broke the silence of the air waves as he watched Blue Lion fall. He knew the princess had been covering him as he tried for a close range shot of his new weaponry. Her going down meant something was wrong with the team as a unit and Pidge didn’t like it one bit. Green Lion’s foot was constricted by a robeast arm and all Pidge could do was watch the princess fall then hit the darkness below. Not a single explosion resulted from the impact he was certain had occurred and Pidge scanned the surface below. The readouts indicated she had fallen into the sea, the one Pidge had been told was deadly.

“Lance! The princess! She fell into the Sea of Meemore!” Pidge yelled as he spotted Red Lion blasting lasers nearby.

“Shit. I’m going down for her. Hunk, Waters – get Pidge close enough so he can use those dust claws. Pidge, aim for the hole in his chest. It’s gotta work!” Lance commanded. He paused only slightly as he thought about the ramifications of taking over command from Waters. She was doing a shitty job at leading the team and Lance was more concerned about facing Coran – or even worse, Nanny – should anything happen to the princess. *And Keith would have my neck if....*

“Lieutenant, stay put! You’re not going anywhere. Her bio-feedback indicates she is alive. We need you up here to get rid of this thing first.” Waters again tried to regain control of the team as she pelted ion darts into the eyes of the screaming robeast.

“That’s the Sea of Meemore down there, Commander, and it’s got my princess! She may be alive in this instant but if that water touches her, she’s dead. I’m going after her! Hunk, Pidge, you know what to do.”

“Are you going against my orders? All of you?”

“Sure as shit fire fuck we are!” Lance’s stream of curses came as he descended toward the faint glimmer of heat readings he could only hope belonged to the princess. The fact that a second, fainter reading was detected nearby and seemed to be moving toward the princess didn’t escape Lance’s eyes. But he couldn’t be bothered to wonder about it - his goal was distinct and urgent. He heard a faint yet familiar voice fill his mind, *I must save her. She will die in these waters. She can’t die.*

Keith felt like he was swimming through honey. He fought the thick white water with all the strength he could find in his body. Wounds from his battle aboard the Maelstrom reopened with his effort, but he was oblivious to the sting of poison entering his blood stream. His body was numbed from fatigue and he cursed at his waning strength. The toxins now pumping through him fermented in his muscles, diverting electrical impulses from his brain. Muscles spasmed and ached, and Keith’s open wounds oozed a thickening blood. Never before had his body failed him, and he urgently looked for something to keep him afloat. Towering waves lifted him and then carelessly tossed him down into flowing gullies. The wind howled around his ears, taunting the water that entrapped him into a dance of ripples and bulges.

He kept vigil over the face of Blue Lion – he must not lose track of it. One side of the great lion was still above water and that alone gave Keith hope. He tried again to push forward, but his body betrayed him and stiffened. A quiet resignation suddenly filled Keith as he solemnly kept his face above the water. He was losing this battle against a deadly sea. Images seeped into his mind, past and present. He saw the limp body of Allura strapped into her lion seat and then the determined face of Lance. As quickly as the images came, a new one flashed in front of him. His first day on Arus came into focus and the crumbling castle was before him, his four friends

standing at his back. The castle beckoned him and he remembered the sensation of knowing exactly where he needed to be.

Keith shook himself alert, fighting the bite of his poisoned muscles and the fractioning of his mind. He lifted his head again to see only the nose of Blue Lion poking out of the white abyss. He wanted to yell out, to scream for one of the Voltron Force to save her, but his voice was paralyzed.

I'm dying. Save her.

Lance ignored the orders being barked at him by turning off the communication link. It was risky, but he needed to concentrate. As he quickly descended toward the sea below, he punched in a formula to calculate the exact outline of Blue Lion and the depth of the surrounding water. The numbers came back in his favor and he throttled forward to pick up speed. The milky water took shape on the screen only in the instant before Red Lion dove in. He opened his throttle even further, feeling the drag of the churning sea on his lion. He needed powerful momentum to lift Blue Lion out of this water so he dove down as deep as he his craft would allow. The pressure gauges in the cabin started to beep and Lance pulled Red Lion to a halt. Lazy prisms of color, iridescent structures pressed up against his screen and he momentarily marveled at the beauty of the deep waters, untouched by the Arusian atmosphere.

That familiar voice hit him again and two sentences floated in his mind: *I'm dying. Save her.* Lance struggled to identify the voice. Was it his own? He shook himself free from his straying thoughts and opened full throttle, streaming upward toward the slowly sinking Blue Lion. His calculations indicated it would take 60 seconds to breach and only 45 seconds to reach the princess. He counted, his ears popping and heart racing. In a few short seconds.... Contact! Red Lion briefly struggled under the added weight of Blue Lion, but then regained momentum and blasted out of the Sea of Meemore. Lance flipped on his communication link and welcomed the sound of Hunk's curses.

"I got her, guys! Finish off that robeast and let's get the hell out of here!" Lance said as he ran another scan over Blue Lion resting limply over his ship. He picked up the heat signature of Allura and sighed with relief. She was alive.

Lance skirted Red Lion around the reaching arms of the robeast and watched as Hunk and Waters fended them off skillfully. Pidge shot out all his reserve weapons as he approached the gaping wound in the robeast's chest. He was saving his best for last, and by fluke or flaw, Pidge penetrated the wound with his front claws. He dug deeper into the circuitry, submerging the lion's nose into the hole. He took a deep breath and pushed the glowing red button. The claws of Green Lion shot out and dematerialized into a vapor of minute spores, dancing through wires and flesh and settling among them. The robeast roared and clenched to emit its deadly pulse, but as it released, the pulse backfired and clung to its body.

Pidge smiled with pride. It had worked! Nearly two years ago he had watched in amazement as a certain tree on Arus showed no signs of damage when struck by lightning. He harvested material from the species and ran thousands of tests until he finally discovered that the tree had an organic compound that not only absorbed electric shock, but actually thrived on it. His curiosity had garnered a new hope in developing a defense mechanism for the lion fleet and Keith granted Pidge the time and resources to conduct his research. After several failed prototypes, Keith hadn't lost faith in the little genius and he continued to offer his support. If only he could be here now to see how their perseverance had paid off. Pidge sighed at the thought of his captain missing out, but then yelled out with excitement as the robeast imploded and disintegrated before their very eyes.

"Nice job, little buddy!" Hunk exclaimed as he saw Pidge's smiling face. It was the first time the kid had genuinely smiled since Keith left and Hunk was happy to see it. His thoughts suddenly turned to the princess and he panicked. Was this why he had that awful feeling in his stomach earlier? Or maybe it was the terrible new leadership they were under. Hunk felt his temper rising as he thought of the bad commands Waters had given them, and her reluctance to form Voltron. Sure, it all worked out in the end, but not if the princess was hurt. "Lance, how is she?"

"My readings say she's still breathing, but I don't know about injuries. Coran's prepping Dr. Gorma and I'm heading back to the castle. I picked up another faint heat cell down near Blue Lion. I had seen a sailing vessel on the sea as we approached and I'm hoping it's still afloat. If not, that might have been one of the crew I detected down there. Someone needs to check it out," Lance relayed, his voice tense with frustration.

"I'll go. The rest of you join Lance back at the castle and be with the princess," Waters ordered, clearing her throat to contain the tremor in her voice. She was overwhelmed with anger, and yet idle with concern. She had been disobeyed by the whole team and this infuriated her, but she knew they would stick together if she tried to discipline the obvious culprit. And what of the princess? Could she blame anyone but herself for that? Waters was certain it had been a good decision not to form Voltron, and they did defeat the robeast after all. They could have used Pidge's weaponry sooner to end everything, but maybe the princess just wasn't cut out for this after all. She would have to discuss this with Coran.

Waters flew low over the Sea of Meemore, her scanners at full power, as the rest of the team jetted toward the castle. She zig-zagged over the water, unsure whether or not finding life was a good sign. She saw an odd shape in the distance and paused over it, flipping on her spotlight.

"Crap." A line of debris spread out in front of her and she knew the ship had been lost. No heat cells came through as she hovered over the debris field. It was a complete loss. She flew Black Lion higher up into the air and did one last scan, to no avail. Without looking back, she flew toward the Castle of Lions, dreading the mayhem that was likely awaiting her.

A body was sinking into the Sea of Meemore. Keith was no longer fighting to stay alive and he felt serene with this resolve. Warmth filled him and he was cradled in the arms of the mighty

waves. He didn't see the blood from his wounds creating a pinkish swarm around him as it dissipated into the surrounding whiteness. He saw nothing but the darkness of his closed eyes becoming a backdrop to his memories. He sank deeper and further into the past, days swarming by him in a cascade of droplets like rain on a window pane. But something nagged at him. He paused at the image of his best friend, at first impish and smiling, and then overcome with fury and fire. Keith, this dying man, suddenly felt the terror that belonged to Lance. His flesh burned away in a searing heat and Keith was left with the bare bones of his soul.

Was that Lance's heart beating so loudly in his mind, pounding and resonating throughout the remnants of his body? He was rising and churning and Keith felt air fill his lungs once more. Left in the wake of Red Lion's impact on the sea, Keith's body was tossed through the water and upwards into the sky as he rode the crest of a wave. This wave crashed in on itself, its weight massive, and fell into the remains of the splintered Lion's Den. A current surged through Keith, his body empowered by the oxygen reaching his lungs and he grappled at a bobbing plank. He latched onto it and eased his aching body to the surface. There he rested, coughing and sputtering as blood dripped from him in relentless trickles. His body fought the poison by purging tainted blood, and in the swell of pain, Keith was swallowed by darkness.