

To Know Is Not Enough by Otlal3
Chapter 16: Believing in the Dead

Author's Chapter Notes:

I don't own Voltron, it's characters or settings. I just enjoy writing about them and receive no money for doing this.

This chapter is Rated R for language

An ancient clock stood in the Great Hall, reduced to a small darkened spire by the vastness of the room. Its casing was of old sinuous wood that smoothly encircled the abalone face. Magnificent in its simplicity, it was absent of the trimmings of many royal fixtures. A superstition floated around the Castle of Lions that the spirit of King Alfor resided in that clock, and as long as it kept ticking, Arus would survive anything. But now, the clock remained still and unmoved by the constant grace of time. Its ebony hands were stiffened against two numbers, indicating its exact moment of demise. One forty-eight - - sixty seconds after Princess Allura had died.

An audible gasp took hold in the castle when the princess died, as though the very structure itself was holding its breath. Waiting. Watching. Hoping. Rumors spread quickly that it wasn't Alfor's spirit held in the clock, but rather that of the royal family itself. And as the last of its lineage passed on, the clock ceased.

"I would like to forget the hour you so stubbornly hold..." Coran whispered to the clock as he placed a hand on the deep ember wood. Few people knew how fastidiously Coran cared for that clock. Each night he wound its brass mechanisms with a gentle twist of his wrist and then delicately wiped every inch of surface as he tracked the pendulum's rhythmic swing through the window to the deep holds of the clock body. But on this night, he simply gazed at the silent timekeeper and sighed. He had tried to revive it several times, but to no avail. The clock remained frozen, a permanent reminder of Coran's - and Arus' - most heart wrenching moment.

Coran shuddered as he thought of the tasks before him as royal advisor. A cloud of fear lingered around the castle, and he knew that there would be many changes to come. As he closed his eyes in thought, it occurred to him that there was no one left to trust on the outside and the images of an occupied planet came to him. In that instant he knew Arus was in trouble.

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"Empty? Twice?" Lance's voice trembled as he stared at Coran's troubled face.

"Yes. I sent her out on a second flight... to search. She was gone for two weeks, and again came back empty," Coran replied as he looked away from Lance's intense gaze. "We have to assume that the captain is dea-

“No! Don’t you dare say it, Coran. He’s not gone. I would know. He’s not!” Lance felt a flutter of confusion fill his stomach and he felt like child unbelieving that his pet had just died. But his words were sharp and pointed - he wouldn’t let anyone on Arus think Keith was dead.

“Lance, I sent Cera as well as our best riders to search for him, to no avail.”

“Send them again!”

“I can’t. With the Alliance breathing down our necks, the peculiar behavior of Commander Waters, Doom’s threats, and the princess, trouble is closing in. I can feel it. I need all resources here until we know what we are facing.”

Lance rose angrily from his chair and paced the room. Perhaps the old man wasn’t as naïve to the bigger problems of the Universe as he thought. He wanted to tell Coran everything he knew about Commander Waters; he wanted to share his frustration at being brushed off by the Alliance generals when he called to confront them about the commander; he wanted to shed some of the burden of this terrible puzzle. But Lance knew the castle had ears, and he was still uncertain who he could trust. He paused in front of Coran and assessed the older man’s tired eyes and wrinkled face. He had always been trustworthy and loyal to the interests of the royal family, and Lance felt a sudden need to protect him from all that he knew. It wasn’t time yet to divulge.

“You can’t tell her, Coran,” Lance instructed as he stood in the middle of the room, the sole of his boot restlessly skimming the plush carpet.

“If she doesn’t already know, she will. Rumors spread quickly. There is nothing I can do to stop them.” Coran noted Lance’s sudden reluctance to state names and sighed with a heavy heart. He now must face the consequences of Keith’s supposed death, knowing full well that all that had transpired in the past two weeks left Arus at the mercy of the Alliance. *The New Alliance*, as it had been dubbed by an incredulous recruit. To Coran, it was fitting. At one time, the Alliance was their greatest ally in the war, but things were different now. It was no longer just about maintaining peace throughout the galaxy. Now there were investors and speculators who held the hands of the Alliance leadership. It was no longer a military union, but rather a business between distinct leaderships.

“Fine.” Lance had little more he could say and he sighed with resignation. “I’ll tell the team.”

“Thank you. And the commander?”

“Do whatever you want, Coran. Her response will be the same whether from your mouth or the mouth of some rumor-spreading peon.”

“And you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Lance, you’re handling this news better than I expected. Should I be worried?”

“Well, since I don’t believe Keith is dead, maybe you *should* worry! But that’s your problem, not mine! Right now, my problem is facing the team and telling them that you think he’s dead and exactly what that means for the Voltron Force. You know as well as I do that things are not okay around here, Coran. We are all on edge, and have been since Keith left. If he is the only one that can make things right again, then I plan on making sure he comes home... Alive!” Lance looked intently into Coran’s eyes and then quickly spun around and walked out the door.

“Whatever your plan, Lieutenant, go with caution,” Coran whispered into the empty room.

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Commander Waters turned from the ragged team of pilots sitting before her and stared out the large window in the conference room. They looked tired and worn and Waters knew she had something to do with that. A tinge of regret filled her gut, but quickly floated away as she recalled the conversation with Alliance generals she had had one hour ago. “You’ve proven yourself, Commander. Voltron is now yours,” they had said. At last. She felt proud and confident in that moment having finally accomplished her dream.

“The Alliance is sending two replacement pilots. As soon as they arrive we will conduct strategic overhauls of the current Voltron operating system. This will be sanctioned and funded by Alliance investors in hopes of creating prototypes to assist in future battles,” Waters said as she turned to face her audience.

“Hold on!” Pidge rose from his seat. Because he spoke only when necessary, people always stopped to listen to his words, captivated by his brilliance. “Voltron doesn’t belong to the Alliance. What makes you think you have any right to come in here and attempt to duplicate something that doesn’t belong to you?”

“You are right, Pidge. Voltron still belongs to Arus. It always will. But our Alliance contract states that when warranted, Voltron can be subjected to such tests... for purposes of fulfilling the mission of peace throughout the Universe.” Coran spoke sharply from his seat, his eyes fixed on the commander.

“The princess wouldn’t allow it!” Hunk thumped his fist against the table and the commander jumped. He was a big man and she wondered just how loyal he would remain in the coming months.

“When the princess is... unavailable, the decision is left to the captain of the Voltron Force to decide,” Waters replied carefully.

“Well Keith wouldn’t allow it either!”

“Hunk... Pidge...” Coran started, and then turned to Lance.

“He’s dead.” Lance stated flatly. He was leaning against the wall in the shadows, his arms crossed and face blank. Slowly he moved to Hunk and Pidge, and placing his hands on the table in front of them, he stared directly at one and then the other.

“He’s dead,” he repeated, his eyes penetrating theirs with a calmness that didn’t quite befit him. Hunk stared back at his friend, his mouth pouting with uncertainty. Something wasn’t right. Keith doesn’t just die, and Lance doesn’t just announce it haphazardly like this. Hunk glanced at Pidge next to him and saw the younger pilot’s face contorted with confusion and discomfort. Whatever Lance wasn’t saying, Pidge wasn’t in on it. Hunk was sure there was more to this, but he played along and swept Pidge into a big hug as the boy grieved for his friend and idol.

“I’m sorry for your loss. Alliance generals have given me authority to command Voltron indefinitely. As such, I believe now is the time for us to work on duplication and systems overhauls. Along with the two pilots, a team of engineers will be arriving to commence these operations. I expect you all to welcome them as they will be staying with us as long as necessary to complete the project.” Waters stated dryly.

“Why two pilots, Waters?” Lance asked, his hand resting on Pidge’s shoulder.

“Lieutenant, due to your... tendency... for insubordination, I have decided to ground you until further notice.”

Lance felt the storm in his gut rise and he walked over to the window to calm himself. *Easy does it, Lance. This could work to your advantage*, he thought as his mind worked to concoct an appropriate response. But before he could react, a loud grumbling surfaced behind him. He spun around as Hunk rose violently and threw his chair at the wall with a force expected of a man his size. The chair shattered on contact.

“Do you know what you’ve done to us? Do you?! We were fine until you came along! You’re an evil bitch and I refuse to work under you!” Hunk spat, his face red with rage and arms flailing about. Lance ran over to him and stood between the fuming giant and Waters. With an eyebrow cocked, Lance shoved Hunk to the floor and landed with his knee digging into the large man’s back.

“Stand down, Hunk!” Lance commanded as he leaned down to the floor where Hunk’s face was pressed.

“Get off me, you maggot!”

“Hunk, chill out buddy. Go for a walk. We’ll talk about this later,” Lance quietly said and instantly Hunk’s writhing body calmed. As the two pilots rose from the ground, they nodded forgiveness to one another, each acknowledging the other latent messages behind the gesture. “Pidge, go with him. I’ll find you guys later.”

Lance watched his two friends leave the room and then turned to the commander. “I suggest you request two more pilots. Hunk and Pidge won’t be flying with you any longer.”

“I’d like them to stay on. They are both exceptional pilots.”

“You heard the man. Hunk isn’t going to fly under you,” Lance stated.

“He’s my subordinate! He’ll do as I tell him,” Waters snapped.

“Actually, Commander, Hunk’s commission is very specific and identifies him as subordinate only to certain Alliance generals... and me. He has no obligation to you as his commanding officer.” Coran calmly stated. Although this part of Hunk’s file was marked confidential and hand delivered to Coran, the disaster he felt looming warranted this snippet of information.

“What are you talking about, Coran?” Lance interjected. This was news to him and he wanted more information.

“I’m not at liberty to discuss the details of Hunk’s position. But Commander Waters, I suggest you ask for those two extra pilots. Hunk will be lead mechanic on detail for Arus. And Pidge... well, despite his brilliance, he is still youthful in many ways. He will not serve you well without his own team. I will submit a formal request that Lance be assigned to lead Arus’ royal Army division and that Pidge remain here to work on upgrading our weapons systems. None of the original team will be under your direct supervision, Commander. As much as I dislike the current state of affairs between Arus and the Alliance, it would be wise to start fresh with your own team,” Coran replied as he rose to leave.

Lance watched the royal advisor solemnly exit the room. He turned to Waters and stared at her with questions rocketing through his mind. *Why is Hunk’s commission top secret? Who is his CO? What the fuck is the deal with all these secrets?!* He wanted to scream and throw things around the room, but he took a deep breath and stepped in front of Waters. “I don’t take well to liars or power-hungry officers with a flair for manipulation. I haven’t found a way to do it yet, but your time here will be short, Commander. Don’t get too comfortable.”

“Your captain is dead, Lieutenant. I’m here to stay.”

Lance snorted and crossed his arms. “Well even in death, Keith could fly Voltron better than you ever will. And you know it. You’re just a puppet to the Alliance, Percina. They hate you as much as I do.”

Commander Waters remained silent. For some reason, this man had gotten under her skin and she felt her confidence falter as he stated a truth beyond what she had been able to admit to herself. She was not the best pilot on Arus and not a skilled commander. She had been in denial, but Lance’s words shook her into reality. Her face fell and doubt stretched into her as Lance smirked and left the room.

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Lance stood quietly by the bed in the infirmary. He looked down upon the lovely golden hair of Allura, his princess and friend. The woman who loved his best friend; the woman his best friend

loved in return. He placed a hand on hers, feeling its clammy coldness against his own warmth. He shuddered, then clutched her fingers and pulled them to his lips for a soft kiss. Tenderly, he placed her hand under the blanket and lightly squeezed her shoulder.

As he moved away from the bed, he felt a surge of anger reach into his gut and spill out. He whispered curses at Commander Waters for her incompetence, at the Alliance for their lies, at Zarkon and his petulant son for their determination, at the disastrous state of affairs at the Castle of Lions. He had tried to keep his anger in check throughout Allura's illness, but he could hold it in no longer and without thought he growled into the air and punched at the wall.

"Shit!" he called out as he cradled both fists against his chest, each throbbing from contact with the steel castle walls.

"That was dumb, Lance," spoke a weak voice and he spun around.

"Oh god, that hurt!" He yelled, doubling over and absently stomped his foot in rhythm to their throbbing.

"Did you even do any damage? To the wall, I mean."

"Very funny, Princess." Lance was in pain and still fuming, but he found a certain comfort in Allura's quips. She had died last week when her body rejected the new kidney, and then been revived in the last moments of hope. And now, her color was slowly returning to normal, and her spirits were finally lifting. Despite her smile and playful nature - or perhaps because of it - Lance dreaded what he was there to tell her.

"Well, I just wanted to make sure it wasn't all for naught." Allura grinned at her friend. She watched him flex his fingers and heard him sigh as each one moved in the proper direction. Her smile faded as Lance slumped his shoulders and sighed again, deeper and more weighted than the first. "Lance, help me sit up, will you?"

He sat next to the princess and scooped her shoulders with his arm, sliding her up onto her pillow so she was level with him. He frowned at her frailty, and without a thought, comforted himself by brushing her cheek with his fingers. He was about to break her heart.

"So what's on you mind, Lance? I know you didn't come here just to lash out at my castle."

Sharp. She's always been so sharp.

"Princess, we have to talk. It's Keith." Lance stopped, thrown off by the unmoved expression on Allura's face.

"Do you believe them?" Allura asked, her eyes turning slightly from Lance's gaze.

"Who? What?"

“Do you believe them? That Keith’s...” She gestured her hand erratically in the air, unable to speak the word.

“Princess, how? Who told you?” Lance’s tone was calm, but his face turned red with ire. He didn’t want anyone else to have the daunting task of telling Allura about Keith. This was something he had to do, as Keith’s best friend and Allura’s guardian.

Allura slowly shifted her eyes around the room and Lance followed her gaze as he realized what she was indicating. Whispered rumors had reached the ears of their precious princess, rumors about the death of the man she loved. Lance frowned at the realization the no one was immune to the faint words carried on the winds of Arus.

“Shit. That’s not how you were supposed to find out. What do you know?”

“Lance, I’d rather hear what you know... it’s more likely to be the truth,” Allura calmly stated. She saw the hesitation in Lance’s eyes and continued, “Please. I deserve to know the truth.”

“Okay. Shit.” She was right, and Lance swallowed twice before sharing the details of Coran’s efforts to find Keith. He paced the details with Allura’s expressions – her blank stare turning into a frown followed by a furrowed brow and a quaking chin.

“Allura,” Lance leaned into her ear and whispered as his hand fell to hers, “to answer your first question... I don’t believe it. Not for a second. I would know if he was gone. You’ve seen him come back from the brink, Allura. Even if he’s injured or being held against his will... you know he’ll make it.”

“Oh Lance, how can you be so confident? I want to believe what you believe, but...” Allura’s voice was weak and barely audible, but her warm breath floated around his cheek and to his ear.

“No. Look at me.” Lance gently touched her shoulders and perched himself directly in front of her faltering eyes. “It’s not a matter of believing *what* I believe. It’s a matter of believing *me*. You have to trust me. I’ve never lied to you before, Princess.” Lance paused and again leaned in, this time his lips perched next to hers as he feigned a concerned embrace. “He’s alive. And... I’m bringing him home.”

Allura remained still and quiet, aware that Lance was determined to keep this exchange between them. She quickly made accounts of all the times Lance had come through for her, and she couldn’t recall a single time he had lied or failed her. She could only believe him now, and she sighed with relief. “I believe you, Lance. That he’s alive and that you will bring him home. We face troubled times on Arus. We need him.”

“I need your help, Princess. Tell me how to find him.” Lance hovered over Allura and looked in her eyes. Without a thought he gently lifted her head from the pillow and rearranged them, but he instructed her with commanding words. “I’m going to step away from you and flirt with the nurse. Write down your instructions. You’ll have only a few minutes.”

Lance rose and swaggered over to the young nurse on the opposite side of the room. Allura grabbed the pad of paper next to her bed and scribbled her note with no attention to penmanship. She tore off the paper as Lance walked back and folded it in half.

“Please deliver this to Nanny if you wouldn’t mind. These instructions should keep her busy until my release from the infirmary,” Allura smiled and waved the paper in front of Lance as he took it from her.

“Will do. I’ll stop by in a couple days to check in, Princess.” Lance stared at her intently and Allura knew that she wouldn’t see her friend again for a long time. She frowned a bit, but then quickly delivered a practiced smile.

“Wonderful! I look forward to seeing you. And tell those boys to come visit me... really soon,” Allura instructed as she reached for Lance’s hand.

Lance wanted to hold her hand for longer and he wanted to shelter her from the harsh changes that awaited her beyond the doors, but his task was clear. He stared at the princess and with more confidence than he felt, straightened his shoulders and walked through the opening door, where he paused to give Allura a comforting wink.

He walked quickly down the corridor and unfolded the note to reveal Allura’s frantic script:

Find your Stride!

Lance smiled at Allura’s cleverly disguised instruction and quickly popped the small piece of paper into his mouth to be destroyed by teeth and spit. As he chewed, he listed the steps involved in finding the famed Tiger Fighter and remembered that first and foremost was a necessary conversation with Hunk and Pidge. Lance hoped they were moping somewhere obvious like the lounge and was pleased to see them sitting on the couch when the door opened.

Hunk looked up when Lance entered, his face twisted with concern. None of the anger remained, at least Lance couldn’t see it as his giant friend rose from his position next to Pidge. The younger pilot fidgeted with his glasses, his cheeks and eyes red and tear-stained.

“What’s going on Lance?” Hunk asked.

“Nice show up there, Hunk. You played it well... and I owe you both an apology. I wanted to discuss things with you before the meeting, but I didn’t make it. How you holdin’ up Pidge?” Lance asked as he ruffled the boy’s hair.

“I’m fucking miserable! I’d like to know why you aren’t your usual pissy self,” Pidge angrily commented, his voice full of suspicion.

“OK, OK. Easy. I don’t have all the answers. But...” Lance scribbled some words on a piece of paper and handed it to Hunk and Pidge.

Keith's not dead. I know it. I leave tonight to find him.

Hunk looked up at Lance and squinted as though trying to see the whole truth in the scattered pieces he was collecting.

"I'm going too," Hunk said when he couldn't figure it out.

No. I need you here. You and Pidge will still be working on Voltron. It'll be weird if you don't show up to work for a few months. Coran set things up nicely for me –I'll be "working for the royal army" so only he will notice my absence.

Lance handed them the paper with his scribbling.

"He's not dead?" Pidge asked Lance, a pleading in his voice. Lance placed a finger to his lips, asking Pidge to be quiet and moved his eyes around the room. He scribbled another note on paper and handed it over.

I would know if he's dead. He's not. Allura thinks Stride can help, so I will find him first. In the meantime, you guys need to listen to things going on around you. Don't talk much. Be discreet. You have the training. I need you to be spies... for Arus.

When the note had been read, Lance gave one to each and instructed them to eat the paper as he was doing. The conversation was over.

"Hunk, you'll be owing us all – especially Keith – an explanation about your commission. He's gonna want to know exactly who you report to, if not him," Lance said, watching his friend closely.

Hunk frowned as he contemplated Lance's source and what it would mean to his assigned duty. He could only think of one thing to say for now: "I can't."

"Yeah, well I think you can. I suggest you avoid talking to your CO until this is over. You guys are smart enough to know that something fishy is going on. We can only trust each other. Right, Hunk?"

Hunk paused and then nodded. Lance was right. There were too many secrets and unknowns floating around right now. All they had was each other.

"Be careful, Lance," Pidge said quietly. The young pilot felt a sense of pride to be a part of this team and he silently vowed to do his part by keeping watch over Voltron and the princess while Lance went on his journey. When Keith returned, he would straighten things out, Pidge was certain.

Lance smiled and squeezed his friends' shoulders as though confirming their bond. He would return with his captain and friend, and united they would stand.

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That night, under the cover of darkness and an early autumn snowfall, Lance stole away into the village and borrowed a horse from the riding stables. He left a satchel of Arusian gold in exchange for the mare and tried not to feel guilty for his actions. With one last look at the castle as he left the village, Lance was hard pressed to see the turmoil that brewed inside those crisp walls. But it was there, and he was the only one who could bring back the champion of Arus to set things straight.

As he trotted off into the night, Lance once again heard that voice in the back of his mind speaking to him; *I'm dying. Save her.* He recognized the voice, but refused to believe what his good friend had been saying. Still, for a fleeting moment, Lance wondered if Keith may truly be dead after all. He shook the thought from his mind and kept his optimism afloat with a sentence he could only hope his friend would hear through time and distance.

“She’s safe, Keith. And waiting for you to come home.”