

To Know Is Not Enough by Otlal3
Chapter 5: Departure

The new commander flew the Black Lion exceptionally well, and Keith breathed deeply with relief. *Perhaps this transition will be easier than expected.* After maneuvers and debriefing, Keith went to his quarters and attempted to sort through items he was taking with him. A robust knocking at the door stopped his slow progress and he welcomed Hunk, Pidge, and the Princess into his room.

“Keith, Coran told us that you are not allowed to take anything provided by the Alliance – no communicators, no ships or vehicles, no... guns!” Pidge announced as he anxiously circled the room.

“How will you survive out there, boss?” Hunk asked. He had been given direct orders to stay at the castle when he inquired about accompanying Keith on his mission. This was a difficult order to follow, but he would.

“I’ll be fine, guys. I have my own two legs and my wits.” Keith tried to reassure them as he stuffed a supply of warm clothes into his bag.

“This is simply unacceptable, Keith. The House of Arus cannot supply you with the latest weaponry as it all belongs to the Alliance, but you will not leave here unarmed,” Allura declared as she turned to face Keith. She looked into his eyes and saw how deeply sad he was, and the conflict he felt over leaving his team and avenging his parents. Breaking her stare, she brought her hands from around her back and presented Keith with a magnificent sword. “I want to give you this. It was my father’s sword. He carried it into many successful battles. With it, I trust you will return to us unharmed.”

“Princess, it’s beautiful,” Keith said as he gazed at the mastery of the weapon before him. The blade was double-edge of the finest steel, worked to a sharpness that cut air, and the elaborate golden hilt shone five jewels, each the color of the lions. “I can’t accept this. It’s too important to be thrown, to you.”

“You are important. Your return is imperative for the continued success of our battles and if you do not accept this gift, the royal house of Arus will consider it an insult.” Allura struggled under the weight of the blade, but she continued to hold it until Keith blinked with understanding. He bowed his head and accepted the gift with a small smile on his face. It was a magnificent blade and he held it up to the light with one hand, admiring its precision. He gently placed it on the bed next to his bag and thanked the Princess with a smile. Her heart filled with warmth - she hadn’t seen that infectious smile marked with a slight dimple on one side, in so long.

“Boss, I don’t want you to starve out there. I know you are capable of getting your own food, but just in case, I made some jerky from rabbit I caught myself. I hope you like rabbit. Princess

showed me the best spots for hunting, and I got 5 of them! The jerky came out great – not that I tried any,” Hunk said sheepishly as he handed his captain a bag full of dried meat.

“Wow, Hunk! Well done! I’ve never had rabbit, but I am sure it will be very tasty. Thank you!” Keith openly laughed at his giant friend, and marveled over his hunting success. Allura tingled at the sound of Keith’s laughter. She had feared she wouldn’t hear it again before he left.

“Keith, it’ll stink not knowing how you are or where you are. We’ll miss you tons,” Pidge piped in as he pulled something from his pocket. “I found this in a village store. It’s a parchment roll for you to write us. And pencils too. You will write?”

“Yes, thank you Pidge! That is so thoughtful of you. I hope that my letters can get to you.” Keith took the parchment and placed it next to the sword, then swiftly returned to Pidge and messed his hair.

“We’ve thought of that too, Keith. I’ve reserved the best falcon in the royal falconry for you. It was my father’s falcon, named Cera. She is a magnificent bird and can find home under any circumstances, and return to you in a flash,” Allura stated with pride. “And of course, Orion belongs to you. He has been your stallion since his birth, and I know he wants to be with you on this journey. Unfortunately, the saddle you use belongs to the Alliance, but my father’s is being restored.”

“Princess, your generosity is overwhelming – all of you. I’ll treasure these gifts. They will get me through what I imagine is going to be a very difficult journey. Thank you,” Keith said as he looked at his three companions.

Hunk noticed Keith’s face shift slightly and he knew what the captain was suddenly thinking. “Lance wanted to talk with Waters about some strategy contingencies. Sorry, Keith. He did help me make the jerky, though.”

“Thanks, Hunk. It seems my friend and I will soon part without resolution. So be it. I wish I had time to fix it... but I don’t.” Keith frowned as he thought of Lance.

“He’ll come around, Keith. He always does,” Pidge stated with hope.

The next few days were a whirlwind of activity at the Castle of Lions. As the new Commander Waters ceaselessly trained day and night to the point of near perfection, Keith was preparing for his departure. He was bestowed with more gifts from throughout the court. He received rudimentary maps of Arus from the village cartographer, waterproof matches from the alchemist, and snow boots and snow shoes from Coran. Keith chuckled to himself when he took note of his gear. He was certainly breaking free from technology and stepping back into a lost era of primitive exploration.

The morning of Keith's departure came all too quickly, yet everyone knew that he was eager to start out. It was a fine spring morning with the dampness of a night rain burning off into a thick mist. The green of the trees was deep and beckoning as the birds sang their morning reverie. A somber group stood at the main gate of the castle, eyes downcast. Allura breathe deeply, waking the shuddering beast of grief in her chest. She looked down the row of well-wishers and admired how sharp Keith looked in his commoner wardrobe. A long-sleeved undershirt stretched over the muscles in his forearms and a black tunic fitted loosely around his shoulders, cinched at the waist with a leather belt. He wore black pants tucked into a drab pair of leather boots crafted for him by the local cobbler. He remained confident and stood tall, and the princess knew his heart made him the great leader that he was, not his uniform.

"Pidge, you keep an eye on Hunk, okay? Keep him out of Nanny's kitchen," Keith smiled. Pidge saluted him and took his new orders proudly.

"Hunk, watch over Pidge. Teach him your ways, oh Large One!" Keith laughed.

"Aye aye, Captain!" Hunk replied, saluting with one hand and holding his belly as he laughed with the other.

"Coran. There are no words. I can only thank you for all that you have done for me," Keith said as he shook Coran's hand.

"And you for us, Captain," Coran replied.

"Commander Waters, I've given you all I can and I trust you with the lives of these people, my friends. Aside from that burden, enjoy your stay on Arus. It is a beautiful planet," Keith suggested.

"I certainly will, Captain. Best of luck out there."

Keith moved in front of Lance who was looking at the ground between his feet. No one moved or breathed as they anticipated the drama that was certain to ensue. The two pilots remained steady, holding their ground in a stubborn battle of will. Who would hold out the longest? Would Lance look up, or would Keith silently walk away. None of the observers could comprehend the anguish that arose in Keith and Lance. Neither would let the other completely abandon him, and it was Lance who finally looked up to the friend who remained standing silently before him.

"Lance, I need to speak with you in private for a moment," Keith instructed, pulling Lance by the elbow into the alcove. The line of people watched them as they spoke, imagining all the things being communicated. "Lance, I know you are mad at me, and that's fine. It doesn't mean I'm not sad to be leaving like this. No matter, I am still your commanding officer and your friend. And as both, I need to ask you to look after the Princess. I tried to make it clear to Commander Waters that she is to remain on the team and that she is incredibly stubborn. I don't know if Waters got it. Just keep her safe. And I know you think I am a crappy leader, but contact me if anything goes wrong and I will return."

Lance stared at Keith, and slowly he started to speak. "I never said you were a crappy leader. You said that. I said you were a fool," Lance replied, his face expressionless as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Keith stood still and thought about Lance's antics over the past few months. *It's true. He only called me a fool. Hah!* Keith laughed quietly and Lance cocked his head to the side with a frown. This was not the response he was expecting. "Well, you're right Lance. I am a fool!"

"Yes. You are. And I'd like to know what the hell you're going to do when you find this Panic guy?" Lance moved his hands to his hips as though posturing in front of a guilty child.

Keith stopped laughing and glanced at his well-wishers milling about. "I don't know. Ask him why he did it. I don't really know."

"Are you going to kill him?" Lance's tone had become demanding and he stepped toward Keith.

"Lance, I don't know. Why does it matter?"

"Why doesn't it? You're a fool on a fool's errand, Keith. Remember, to know is not enough."

"You're out of context and out of line, Lance. No one knows more about that phrase than me. It will be enough, and what I decide to do with that knowledge is up to me. But of course, I can't do anything right in your eyes. Simply breathing the same air as you appears to set you off," Keith replied, his hands in the air with frustration.

"To know is not enough, Keith." Lance repeated under his breath. Keith silently met his friend's unwavering eyes and found no comfort there. He turned away and walked back to the gathered crowd. Keith quickly pondered if anger or concern determined Lance's words, but at this moment he couldn't be bothered to figure it out. His most difficult farewell was before him.

Keith stepped in front of the Princess and she felt the pressure of tears building in her eyes. In her effort to will them back, she blinked and a single tear escaped down her cheek.

"Princess Allura, as I leave, I see that I'm still the same foolish man as I was when I arrived," Keith said as he looked briefly at Lance, "but you have emerged from the ruins of your kingdom and serve as a beacon of hope for your people. I am mesmerized by your kindness, your tenacity, your passion... and your beauty. Don't ever change." Keith took her hand and gently kissed it, as was the acceptable form of greeting and farewell. He soaked in the sweet smell of her skin and the smoothness of her hand in his reluctance to let go. Her smell intoxicated him and without thinking or caring, he released her hand and traced the softness of her damp face with his fingers.

Allura closed her eyes at Keith's touch and the burning looks of those around them disappeared. She felt her spirit lift as his fingers lingered near her lips and all her sadness was erased, if only momentarily. In that instant, she fell in love with the Captain. It was no longer an innocent crush on a dear friend, and she sighed with the emotional relief that accompanied this acknowledgement. Fear seeped in to her yet again as she longed for his safe return, and new tears

flourished from her. She opened her eyes again and turned away from the captain, conflicting feelings of love and dread filling her. He took a step back, bowed to the Princess, and then mounted his stallion.

“I’ll write at my first milepost. Be well,” Keith said as he commanded Orion into a trot away from the castle grounds. All were silent as the breeze swirled around them and lifted the mist, creating a tunnel of sunlight through which the captain embarked.

“Princess, he’ll be fine. If it were anyone else, I would say they were insane. But he’ll be fine.” Lance leaned in to the Princess and placed a hand on her elbow. The intimate moment he had just witnessed between her and Keith came as a surprise to him and all who were present, and to Lance it answered many questions and evoked even more. Despite his curiosity and frustration with Keith, he saw the grieving woman before him and felt only the need to comfort her.

“I am sure he will be, Lance,” she responded with a heavy sigh. “I hope you two cleared things up. Why have you been so mad at him, Lance?”

Lance saw the frustration in her scowl, and so he only smiled at her and said, “Because I am in love with him and he doesn’t feel the same about me.” Allora shot Lance a bewildered look and broke into a delighted laugh.

Keith looked back at the Castle of Lions one last time and his eyes found Lance standing next to a laughing Allora. “Thanks, my friend,” he whispered as a smile came to his lips. At the very least, he knew he could count on Lance to watch over the princess. Now, it was time to press forward into the morning and the journey ahead.

Keith had been traveling for six days and was finally in a rhythm. He rarely glanced at the map anymore as he followed the sun’s path across the sky to keep him heading north. He ran Orion at a fast pace in the morning hours and gave him a long break mid-day while Keith lunched and stretched his legs. A steady trot filled the afternoon hours as Keith looked for signs of game to hunt and wild plants to eat. At dusk, a fire was lit and whatever food was foraged or killed was prepared. Cera the falcon followed the horse from above, weaving circles overhead as invisible thermal columns spiraled from the ground. Occasionally she dipped out of sight as she tucked her wings into her body and fell like a bullet, then slammed into a passing bird. She always feasted on her own quarry.

The seventh day of travel commenced with a hearty meal of boiled weasel which Keith had snared after lying in wait for an hour, and steamed fiddleheads which were abundant throughout the springtime landscape.

“Not the most delicious breakfast I’ve had, but it’ll do,” Keith said to Orion who stood nearby grazing on greenery. Keith admired the form of his horse and watched his muscles flex under the midnight hide with each step taken forward and back, in search of the most succulent grasses. Orion’s ears twitched back and forth while listening to the sounds of the vast wilderness they

were traversing. He flicked his tail to bat away a giant fly from his shoulder, but missed and pranced around in a circle, eager to be free of the insect's bite. Keith walked up to the horse, swatted the pest away and wiped the small bead of blood where the fly once sat.

"Orion, I think you and I would be exactly alike if I hadn't decided to chop off my hair before we departed – shaggy and unkempt," Keith chuckled as he ran his fingers through his own mane. His hair was cut short and a bit uneven, his long, dark locks sacrificed under his own hand. Despite the ease of care, it remained disorderly with straight arrows of hair falling into his eyes or ticking his neck. No matter, it was practical for his travels where grooming would not always be an option.

"I am having a hard time getting used to this stubble on my face though. How do you do it, my friend?" Keith simultaneously scratched his growing beard and the whiskers on Orion's lips as he contemplated how grizzly he must appear. The sword he had been given would not work as a straight-edge, and the dagger he carried was frighteningly sharp. Without the prospect of shaving, Keith hoped that he could at least keep it trimmed to avoid his beard becoming home to some unwanted creature. He went to one of his satchels and opened the top. He had not fished through this bag yet and he had forgotten its contents, so his hands and eyes searched for a pair of scissors he was sure had been added. Instead, his eyes fell upon a book with worn edges and a stained cover. *Greek Mythology* read the title. Keith didn't remember packing this book or any book at all, so he opened the cover and saw familiar, hurried handwriting.

Keith, not sure when you will find this, but by now you must be insanely bored and probably on your way back. We all know what a coward you are, so you can quit the act and come home. Besides, there's only so much tooth-picking a man can do! Well, here's hoping you might find some REAL gods to admire, cuz I am tired of being the only one. You always were such a geek (but more recently a fool), so read up. Lance.

Keith laughed and flipped through the pages, wishing there were more surprises from his friend. He found none.