

To Know Is Not Enough by Otlal3
Chapter 8: The Maelstrom

An uneventful three days passed at sea, yet the crew and captain of the Lion's Den remained alert to any potential threats. Keith watched their keen senses hone in on air currents and odd ripples in the sea as though it were the most menial task engrained in their regular duties of splicing line or trimming sails. At times, he was conflicted over the desire to participate in the sail and making the ship run smoothly versus the need to focus on his journey, to plan and outline the coming months. The weight of his task overtook him, and Keith remained solitary. It didn't take long for Keith's body to protest at the chosen idleness and he yearned for an outlet to his pent up energy.

He awoke early one morning to the ache of atrophy in his body. Breath lingered in the air before him, a testament to the cool nights at sea, and the sharpness alerted his lungs. Keith folded himself in half to stretch and then reached upwards, his body accepting the gift of fresh oxygen. As he reached his full arc, his eyes fell upon the height of the main mast. He walked to it and placed his hand on the solid wood, his eyes following the massive pole up to its peak. He thought of his occasional visits to New York City with tall buildings reducing him to a mere grain of sand on the ground, insignificant and expendable among the millions of other tiny people. He scanned the deck and saw that only one crew member was awake, wandering about deck checking lines. It was time for a climb.

He was not as nimble as Pidge, but his feet were sure, proving him to be an astute climber. His body worked hard for that final view atop the mast as he gripped lines and masts, jumping and pushing across stanchions of wood and canvas. His hold was steady and his mind was calm as he sat atop the boat, the sway of the sea pronounced at the apex of the vessel beneath him. Sails billowed in the gusting wind and he moved to procure a better view. Watching silently, the sun enticed a rainbow-sheen from the sea's surface in its morning dance with light. But there, amid the vast colors was a dot of black and Keith paused. He squinted and the dot took shape – a boat. It was moving fast and coming right at them. He blinked to clear his eyes and looked again – black sails. Pirates.

“Sailor below!” Keith yelled down to the crew member whose night-watch duties were nearing end. The sailor glanced up and waved at Keith, acknowledging his climb with a smile. Keith pointed to the horizon and the sailor's smile ended abruptly as he spun around and faced the black ship, its square sails now distinct.

“All hands on deck! Pirates to starboard!” the sailor hollered out with his hands cupped around his lips. He repeated his order and the deck became alive with activity as the crew appeared from all sides.

Keith worked quickly down the rigging as one of the crew climbed up with ease, a spyglass in hand. Landing on deck, he walked up to Captain Hame and they stood quietly in the direction of the ship.

“This should be interesting, young captain. Pirates are not unusual on these seas, and I seem to have charmed them all with a barrel of liquor or Terran cigars. But this is a ship unlike any I have seen. Look at how fast it moves toward us.” Captain Hame spoke, the gravity of leadership in his words.

“You don’t know these pirates then?” Keith asked, a hand over his brow to shade from the intensifying sun. His eyes fell on the flag atop the main mast. It was the Arusian symbol of solidarity marred by a diagonal slice down the middle, a waving hole in the fabric tearing asunder the original intent of the flag.

“I do not. This is a new threat and I know not what we face,” Captain Hame responded.

“I will pose as captain of this ship and no one will know the better.”

“Absolutely not. This is my ship and I will not have my passenger put his life on the line.” The captain turned sharply to Keith and admonished the younger man’s proposal.

“With all due respect, Captain. Notice the flag they wave is an insult to the royal house of Arus - that which I am sworn to protect and uphold. It is my duty and obligation to see that these pirates are dealt with in a manner that will eliminate their disloyalty to the crown,” Keith replied, his eyes level with the captain. He saw a glint of uncertainty in the old man and Keith changed his approach. “Captain, this is what I do. I am trained to fight. If they take me, I am more likely to survive and subdue than anyone else on this ship. Let me do my job and protect you as best I can.”

The captain opened his mouth to speak but it was not his voice that filled the air. “Ahoy! Permission to come aboard. Should permission be denied we will do as we might.”

The two captains turn away from each other and saw the ship broadside to the Lion’s Den, the ship called Maelstrom. Keith met eyes with the captain of Maelstrom, noting his pointed ears and cobalt skin. These were Doom pirates. Captain Hame nodded to the booming voice, permitting this unwanted company. The Lion’s Den crew stood quietly around him, ready to defend and protect. Keith admired their loyalty, and he wondered how they would react to what he was about to do.

“You are not welcome aboard the Lion’s Den, stranger. But as captain of this ship, I will grant you counsel aboard your vessel to discuss your needs. As a gift, I offer you liquor of the seas.” Keith stepped forward ignoring the hand on his elbow and the stern voice whispering his name.

“Your gift is a kind gesture, Captain, but you must certainly know that coming aboard my ship is simply out of the question.” A scowling blue man walked across the plank that now joined the two ships and he landed heavily on the deck of the Lion’s Den. Keith stood tall and unwavering

as the man straightened himself and examined every inch of Keith who was hardly dressed the part of captain.

“It’s awfully bold of you to come aboard without permission, sir,” Keith said firmly.

“Mmm, yes. I am a pirate, though. Would you expect anything less of me? I am Captain Shorg and I might just want to commandeer this ship.” Shorg looked over the small crew and eyed the barrels latched to the ship. He smirked at the ease of this unexpected conquest and stepped closer to Keith. He was tall, a towering man with orange eyes that slanted like a cat. His rancid breath slid across Keith’s brow as he spoke. “You look familiar. Should I be concerned about this, young captain?”

“I doubt our paths have crossed before Shorg. I am Captain Hame and this is my ship and crew. We only seek safe passage across Meemore and do not desire conflict.” Keith diverted the conversation, concerned that the real Captain Hame had spoken true about anonymity.

“Well, perhaps I seek your vessel, or your goods. Or perhaps your crew,” Shorg suggested, an eyebrow raised to the scant albeit hardy individuals standing behind Keith. He walked between them, peering up and down their muscular frames and glowering stares, and stopped in front of the true Captain Hame.

“You may have none. I suggest you return to your ship with the gift I have offered and be on your merry way before this becomes something other than two ships passing on the sea.” Keith looked at the crew aboard the Maelstrom, standing watch from only a leap away. There were twenty pairs of eyes staring back at him, attentive to the more cautious members of the Lion’s Den. Keith wasn’t certain how practiced his adopted crew was at hand-combat and sword fighting and he quickly assessed other options.

“You suggest? There is a fine line between a suggestion and a threat, Captain,” Shorg stated as he stomped over to Keith with rage. “I am inclined to believe you just threatened me. I assure you, little man, I will tear your beating heart out of your chest and feast on it should you cross me with such words again!”

“And I am inclined to believe it is my ship that is being threatened.” Keith stepped closer to Shorg and lowered his voice. “Your reputation is on the line Captain, for you are suddenly faced with a human who does not fear you. How are you going to handle that?”

“You are an imp, but if I cannot crush you, I will crush your crew. Do you really wish to risk their lives?” Shorg kept his voice low, matching Keith’s intensity.

Keith remained silent, searching for an alternative to what he knew would come. It was soon clear a fight was impending. “I’ll make you a deal, Captain. Your four strongest will fight me. Should I lose, you may take our goods. Should I win, you don’t. Either way, my crew and ship are free to go.”

“This is a simpleton’s deal you propose. I worship power, Captain. And blood.” Shorg paced around in front of Keith, contemplating the boldness of the young man who offered himself for his ship. “I will instruct my four to kill you. This will not be an innocent spar. It is to the death.”

“You play your way, and I will play mine. No matter, I will not have blood shed on my ship. This match will be aboard the Maelstrom and my crew will remain here.” Keith looked over to Captain Hame and the others whose lives were now in his hands. If he didn’t win this battle, they would surely die, despite the deal being made. Hame opened his mouth to speak and stepped forward, but was silenced by the intent in Keith’s eyes, a look that made the old captain shudder - the fierce stare of a warrior.

“To the Maelstrom!” Shorg shouted as he leapt onto the plank and bounced across.

Keith turned to the crew and again met the questioning eyes of Captain Hame.

“Captain, please rethink this. You will surely die over there,” Hame pleaded quietly.

“Perhaps. But it is my duty to the crown to preserve innocent lives. And that is what I’m doing. Should I die, please send word to the Castle of Lions.” Keith paused, a slight smile coming to his face. “And if it looks like I am going down, feel free to throw things at my opponents. I’ll need all the help I can get.”

Keith walked across the plank that sagged under his weight to the dark ship Maelstrom, never once looking back. Hame and the crew saluted him in silence as he stepped forth to defend their lives. As Keith stepped on the deck of Maelstrom, the ship’s crew encircled him, some beating their chests and grunting in the primal display of strength. He felt no fear as his mind automatically triggered survival mode, a trance-like state that Keith often entered when a battle beckoned. He was fixated and had no desire to waste energy on those who were not his opponents.

“Captain Hame, I present to you my strongest,” Shorg said with a bow. Three tall, ghoulish men stepped forward, towering over their large captain. Their clothing covered only necessary parts, as pulsing muscles were dressed with dirty sweat. They varied in shade, but their bulk was consistent. Keith had counted on Shorg selecting strong fighters as he knew he would fare better against them in their sluggish nature. Speed was on his side.

“Shorg, I asked for four, yet I see only three,” Keith stated calmly.

“I am the fourth.” A loud female voice called out from behind the three men and Keith saw a pair of yellow eyes peek out. Brown, leathery skin etched with a pasty mouth of green greeted Keith, and he instantly knew this woman would be his toughest challenge. She swayed her hips as she approached him, her crooked hand waving seductively at him. He stood still, suddenly paralyzed by the urge to kiss this beast of a woman. Her wrinkled skin morphed and twisted before him into the face of Allura and Keith remained enraptured by the figure of the princess. He shook his head to regain the composure which usually came so naturally, and the ugly hag was before him once more. This was to be more than just a physical battle.

The circle widened around him and his opponents, and Keith steadied himself against the swaying ship with a wide stance and knees bent. The weight of Alfor's sword pressing against his back gave him some comfort, as did the dagger hidden in his boots. The distant protests from the Lion's Den was no match for the howls and yells on board the Maelstrom as the fight commenced. Keith filled his lungs and all sounds drifted away as he slowly exhaled. He saw only the four people in front of him and his moves became calculated and precise.

One brute swung a fist at him and he easily shifted his head to avoid the blow. As the giant hand faltered in the empty air, Keith grabbed it and crushed the fingers against his knee in a quick motion. The man cried out and lifted his now limp and broken appendage. *Too easy.* The second man stormed at Keith with his full body and grabbed him into a crushing embrace. Keith elbowed the man in the ribs to no avail and the pressure of muscle force against his lungs started to burn. But he had been expecting this vice grip, a predictable one that Hunk often used. Keith folded his body and kicked as another brute came at him. Blood spurted over the face of the his attacker, a shower of red beads against the blue sky. Now he had to deal with the tightening grip around him, but as he worked to twist his body into position, a fierce blow was served to his gut. He gasped and coughed, precious air being expelled from his compressing lungs.

He heard a voice calling his name and looked up to see Allura's distressed image in the crowd. She was weeping and he wanted to call out to her but the fist of his first opponent slammed into his face. His head swam and bobbed, and he pressed a thumb against his middle finger, redirecting his pain sensors from the open wound in his cheek to the gentle throbbing in his finger. This was a well-practiced mental strategy he had mastered long ago to avoid and redirect, and it suited him now.

Keith focused and again found Allura in the crowd. *She's not here. She is safe. Fight your battle!* Keith told himself, furious at his mind for not blocking her out. This was not the first time warfare had veered from a speedy victory as a result of Allura's image and he needed to control it now more than ever. This was not something the military had trained him for – distractions of the heart. As he focused on redirecting his thoughts back into battle, the arms that gripped him moved up around his neck seeking to effectively end his life with a quick snap. This was what he wanted, and he turned his head to fit in the nook of the man's elbow then bit down. The man howled and released Keith, who pulled away a mass of flesh in his mouth. He spit out the chunk and quickly got to his feet. Another beast of a man raged toward him and Keith ducked down then flipped him over. The large head hit the base of the laser canon and he was knocked out. *Okay, brute number three with broken nose is sleeping soundly. That leaves brute number one with the broken hand, brute number two with the bite, and the wily witch. Perfect.*

The bitten man was seething with rage and he approached Keith with a wide stance, yearning for a good grip on that skinny neck. But before he could get close, Keith ran at him and pushed himself against the larger man. The giant staggered as Keith's hand reached down and grabbed between the legs of his opponent and twisted. A deep bellow of pain sank into Keith's ears and he couldn't help but smile. He had learned this trick from Allura who had fended off Lotor with a quick yank and twist to the part of him she found most threatening. Keith had been mere steps from serving a calculated blow to his nemesis and freeing Allura from his slimy arms when a scream came from Lotor like that of a wounded animal. A swift, blue hand had slapped Allura

across the face and Keith had gotten to punch Lotor anyway as a result of that foolish move. And now, there was much satisfaction and pride as Keith used this tactic, but as he twisted more and the cries grew louder, he felt a gentle breath in his ear. His grip loosened and he smelled the rosy scent of Allura floating around him. A hand slid across his chest and down his stomach and he breathed in sharply as it descended down his thigh. A quiet calm overcame him, but he didn't feel aroused. It wasn't right. Allura could arouse him simply by sneezing. In an instant of realization, he twisted his body and punched the source of his distraction. Beneath him fell the writhing witch, laughing with glee at the torture she was capable of imposing.

The man with the injured groin was passed out behind Keith and the witch leapt up, throwing her lips on Keith's. He staggered and stepped back, but her hold on him was strong. Her lips sucked at him, drinking his air as though through a straw. His lungs were tightening and darkness crept into his vision. Keith struggled to stay alert, to fight the evil in this woman. In a flash of repulsion, he realized that fighting her was giving her power. He stopped moving and shuddered at what he had to do. His lips matched the movements of the hag and he kissed her back with the dry passion of a man fighting for his life. She pulled away with a gasp and smirked at Keith. The crew of Maelstrom tightened their circle around him and the witch, sensing that victory might not be theirs.

"You are so handsome, Captain," she whispered as she regained her breath. "You are different from other men. Stronger... sharper. I can't break you like the others. I wish to taste you and feel your heart beat, but you resist me."

A leathery hand touched his face, tracing the open wound down to the shore of his beard and stopping on his chin. Keith grabbed her wrist and flexed to push her away, but Captain Shorg stepped to face him. Shorg snarled and pushed the witch away with a careless shove. His lip curled and a hand flew up to Keith's throat. "You will die on board this ship, no matter how weak my witch may be against you!"

Keith was lifted into the air by the evil captain and thrown against the deck. Shorg was smarter than his brutes, and just as strong. Keith recovered and reached for his dagger, aware that the captain was a more equal opponent. He looked towards the witch who sat amid the shouting crew members, watching him in return. *She's taking notes. Why is she so fascinated by me?* He removed her from his thoughts and went on the offensive, his fist tight and aimed precisely for the captain's face. Bone cracked upon contact and Shorg's mouth oozed with blood. Keith shook his fist out and pressed thumb to forefinger on his other hand, eliminating the pain in his fist. No fingers were broken from the punch and he kicked at Shorg in rapid succession, heavy blows to the gut and back.

Shorg briefly cowered under the attack and Keith stepped back. He would kill if he must, but not unless threatened, and a cowering man was far from threatening. As Keith remained composed standing over Shorg, the injured captain swiftly rose and drew his sword. In a glimmer of metal, Keith felt the blade slice in front of him and split open the skin along his ribs. The sword came at him again on the downswing, aiming for his neck. Shorg was after a beheading and he yelled a scorching battle cry. Keith pointed his dagger at Shorg and lunged at him, his body tight against the captain. He had escaped the blade by stepping close to the man who wielded it and piercing

his heart. Shorg gasped, his arms still high in the air, the sword precariously perched in his weakening grip. Keith pressed against the captain's chest and Shorg dropped the blade, his weight falling forward. Keith withdrew his dagger, his hands red and sticky with blood, and spun around to face crew of the man he had just killed. The witch stepped forward and screamed, her body bent forward as though an illness raged in her gut.

"Nooo! You!" She pointed her crooked hand at Keith. "You killed my captain. I will have your heart!"

She ran to Keith, her loose fists aimed at his chest. As she touched him, a hole of blackness opened over his heart and her hands entered his body. She dug around, searching through his organs and Keith was paralyzed with shock and horror. She found his heart, pulsing and writhing with adrenaline. She tugged at it and he lurched forward, gasping from a pain that invaded his soul. She was trying to tear out his heart. Keith's body tightened, resisting her grisly efforts, and he threw his head back in agony.

A shock of electricity surged through him and he focused again, peering down at the witch. She was again the lovely image of Allura, her eyes smiling and her cheeks flushed. Keith reached out to touch her face – she was so close – but his arms were weak and his chest burned. He coughed as Allura pulled fiercely on his heart. *I love you, Captain. Give me your heart*, a voice spoke to him – the gentle voice of the princess. The woman he loved was killing him.

Keith swallowed, the taste of blood coating his mouth. He felt the dagger in his hand, slippery on the edge of his fingertips and he pulled it into his palm. One by one his fingers wrapped around the hilt and gripped tightly. She wasn't real, this figment of Allura. It was merely a trick of the mind, a yearning of the heart, a ghost of his memory. She was the witch, she had to be the witch. And she had to die. Keith raised his blade, the tugging at his heart betraying his will to survive. He met Allura's eyes for a brief moment, searching for her there. He found only a shell, and his dagger plunged into her back. Allura's body arched and her mouth open in a silent scream. Keith pulled the knife out and plunged again, his strength weakened by the effort. Allura - the witch - released his heart and stumbled backwards. The gaping blackness in his chest closed and Keith's eyes stung with tears. He looked at the image of Allura, collapsed in front of him, and with a heavy soreness, yearned to undo what had been done. She was there, before him, and yet she was a ruse. Slowly, Allura faded into the smaller form of the old witch, whose breath was absent. She was dead.

The Maelstrom quickly shifted under Keith's feet and he looked away from the long yellow hair of the witch, the last vestige of Allura in form. The crew had disappeared, now mere puffs of steam where men once stood. Giant shards of wood flew at him as the sails and masts crumbled. He eased the bloody dagger back into his boot and turned to the Lion's Den, its crew staring at him in quiet reverence. As much as he wanted to stay still and let his aching body quiet down, the Maelstrom was splintering around him with loud cracks and pops. He ran to the plank that had carried him over and stepped on the edge, but it disintegrated on contact, splitting into tiny grains of wood and floating into the churning sea.

“Keith! You must jump or you will sink with the ship!” Captain Hame yelled out to him. Keith cursed this dreadful ship and nightmare of a sea. He cursed the thought of killing the woman he loved and raised his fists to the evil that kept him apart from her. His rage was deep and he threw himself off the Maelstrom and toward the distant side of the Lion’s Den in a giant leap. His body slammed against the boat and several arms latched onto his bloodied clothes, pulling him aboard.

“What the hell happened?” Keith asked, his breath rapid as fits of pain surged through him. He grabbed his side where Shorg’s sword had cut through his flesh and felt the heat of his injury.

“You just killed the Sea Hag of Meemore.” Hame responded, scanning Keith’s injuries.

“Who?” Keith grumbled as he leaned against a collection of barrels. His hand fell on his chest and he looked down at the bruise forming over his heart. He suddenly realized that he had been close to death.

“She’s sailed these waters for decades, causing mayhem and leaving destruction in her wake. NO one has ever eluded her. But you... killed her and saved our ship.”

Keith slid to the floor and let his head fall into his hands. He hated death, even more so when it came at his hands. And the image of Allura dying beneath him, from the force of his knife, was forever burned in his mind.

“This is a good thing, lad. She was a menace. You saved many lives today,” Hame said as he placed thick hands on Keith’s shoulders.

“I know. I thought they were pirates from Doom. The captain. The flag,” Keith responded, absently.

“She was tracking you, Keith. Any contact you had with this water, even just the tip of your shoe, and her senses were honed in on you. The Doom ship, its captain and flag were designed to antagonize you, to find what she wanted.”

“And what exactly did she want?”

“She plunged her hand into your chest, my boy. She was after your heart. She seduced men so she could feast on the precious muscle and drink its energy. And she sought men of power – nobles, royals... captains.” Hame looked directly into Keith’s eyes, a silent story conveyed and Keith knew the captain had crossed paths with the old hag before - a story had been lived but would never be told.

Bandages and ointments soothed the pain Keith felt from his wounds, and as night approached he wrapped himself in his cloak to keep warm. He clutched Alfor’s sword to his chest and rested his back against the side of the ship, the curved wood like a cradle against his tired body. Hair gently tickled his face and fatigue pressed images of his mother’s curls touching his cheeks into his

mind. Her dark hair swept over his nose and eyes, quick brush strokes across a smiling child. He laughed, his heart warm and light. But then he felt the weight of the world on him, and he couldn't breathe. His mouth tasted the bite of shampoo and he choked on ringlets of black. He cried. He screamed. His body ached with the effort to breathe and to stay awake. Mommy was heavy. Please move, Mommy. Please.

Darkness surrounded Keith. He was floating, free of a body's weight. Warm and fluid, he moved around the darkness. He saw amber, a filtered light shone through into his haven. He was safe, embraced by the familiarity of space, and something so comforting and constant. A drum, an intermittent humming, a placid concert soothing his spirit.

Keith stirred, feeling the warmth drain away from him. No longer cradled in a fluid abode, he felt flesh on his hands and his own heart beating wildly. The pressure returned, his body being compressed. Squeezing through a tightness, being pushed toward a white light he feared. He grasped for the amber darkness, but the whiteness consumed him and he screamed. He opened his eyes and milky figures danced before him. Slowly, their features emerged. Tall and short, men and women. Allura. She reached out to him, her yellow hair matted against her sweating forehead. She smiled tiredly, but she longed to touch him, to hold him. The baby she had just borne. Keith.

Allura touched his lips, pert and rounded into a tiny heart. And then he was pulled away and Keith felt the agonizing sting of separation. His heart was discomforted by the emptiness and he stood upright. A body lay in that box, the long, angular one before him. Mommy. He saw her resting, sleeping an endless sleep, never to waken. Daddy was in his box too, sleeping. They were together, but they left him behind. Alone. Why?

Keith cried, his rounded face angled to the sky as though an answer was afloat in the clouds. His tears dripped to his hands, gripped in large fists. The hands of a man. He looked around him, longing for something familiar in this hollow darkness that surrounded him. Faces flashed across his mind – Lance, Hunk, Pidge. Allura. She stood before him, close enough to touch, to kiss, to explore. He reached out and she turned from him. Her golden hair floated around her, and Keith reached again for her shoulder. She turned her face to him and her mouth opened in terror. No sound came out, but the fever in her expression branded him. She ran and he grabbed for her, longing to make this right, his fingers briefly touching her silken strands. No. Don't leave! Not you! Please come back! Please. No!

Lungs filled and his voice opened into a quiet, trembling scream. He heard himself speaking and snapped awake. Captain Hame stood before him with a blank expression.

"You were having a nightmare," he said, handing Keith a cup of steaming liquid. "Drink. It'll soothe your nerves."

"Thanks," Keith replied in a hushed voice, unable to push air into his throat.

"It's not uncommon. The poison water below has ways of entering our dreams. Nightmares, I should say. And after your battle this morning..." The captain knelt down beside Keith and

looked him directly in the eyes. Keith swallowed the warm liquid and returned the stare. He saw warmth in the old eyes, and Keith felt strangely nurtured and protected under the captain's watch.

"You get them too when you sleep? The nightmares?" Keith asked, his voice trembling with fatigue. He was feeling childlike, almost scared, and he sought comfort.

"I did. I no longer sleep on these passages."

"You don't sleep? Doesn't everyone need sleep?"

"Bah! I'll sleep when I'm dead!" the captain exclaimed, his heavy hand patting Keith's knee.

Keith weakly smiled in his growing admiration for the wizened captain, but his mind cried for peace. He closed his eyes, captive to fatigue, and rested his head against a barrel. Captain Hame continued to watch the young man in interest. He had heard many words coming from his troubled sleep, words revealing guttural fear, torture, and grief. The battle he had observed that morning revealed much to the old captain about his passenger. He had seen the image of Princess Allura standing before Keith. He had seen the longing in his eyes and the anguish in his face as he killed the lovely woman. The captain gently shook Keith and pointed to the pouch of stones around his neck. "Take a stone. It'll help." After watching him swallow the tiny pebble, Captain Hame retreated to the ship's bow and shook his head at the sea below. *How can something so evil be part of such a lovely planet?*