

Acknowledgement: I would like to start by thanking **AK47** kindly for the use of “**First Command**” as the main inspiration of this story and also letting me use **most** of the elements from the original story. [Note: the original manuscript has been modified to fit within the structure of the Chronicles. This is just a novelisation of the original script by AK47.]

Warning: Mild angst, violence and language.

Mourn For Rue

Keith looked around the first bridge of the ship of the Esquire Alpha and wondered, not for the first time, what he was doing there. It was true that he had been assigned the position of Deputy Captain, but that still did not explain why he had been placed in a cargo ship heading towards some obscure planet in the depths of space.

This was his first mission since he had left the Alliance Academy a month or two before. He had been certain that his parents and uncle were going to influence Garrison enough to land him a descent position right away and was truly disappointed by receiving the tedious duty of cargo transport.

“Akira? Get me a secure channel to the Garrison,” Captain Masters ordered, reading the file folder Keith had given him on arrival, and looked bewildered at the age of the crew he had been assigned.

“Yes, Sir,” Keith responded and paused for a few moments. “Sir? I’ve cleared a channel. It’s all ready to go.”

Masters nodded curtly before turning to the vid screen on his console. Space Marshal Graham’s face appeared.

“Kirk! What a pleasant surprise!” Graham greeted.

Masters did not look amused and lowered his voice so that the crew on the bridge would not hear him. “Graham, is this some sort of joke? I’m not a dorm mother.” He shook the file folder at the screen.

“It’s a temporary assignment for all of them. You know that. They’re good soldiers,” Graham explained quietly.

“They’re all kids, Thomas. If anything happens...”

“Kirk, they have to leave on assignments sooner or later and I would rather it be sooner. No activities have been reported in your quadrant, which means the Drule Empire is either busy with their own skirmishes or trying to take over Doom again. Just go on with the mission and teach them how to perform accordingly.”

“What about this...” Masters looked through the folder. “Pidge Dewar... The kid’s barely old enough to be out of diapers!”

Graham laughed. He’s quite the whiz at programming. Just sit him in front of a terminal. You’ll be thanking me.”

Masters sighed loudly. “At least you sent me...” his eyes searched the folder again. “Hunk Harper. The only one at an acceptable age out of this lot.”

“Oh, you’ll like him. He’ll have your ship running better than the Explorer!” Graham’s eyes twinkled.

“I still think it’s dangerous to be sending kids so close to the front.”

“You’re more than far enough. By the time anything comes within a hundred light years of you, our forces would be all over it!”

Kirk sighed. “Fine. You know what’s best, old friend. Take care.” He looked at Keith. “You can close the connection.”

Did you want me to roll over and play dead too? Keith thought, annoyed, shutting the transmission. What a stupid mission. Baby sit some stupid cargo in a ship that should have been mothballed after the Colonies were built.

Keith was about to slouch back in his seat when the panel before him began to blink. He scowled and looked over his shoulder. “Captain, there’s a high priority message for you.”

“Transfer it to me.” Masters’ eyes scanned the message on the screen quickly. His face began to reflect his concern. “Akira, establish connection to Garrison, and uplink this message to them.”

“Aye, sir.” Keith hoped the mockery was not evident in his tone. *What am I? Your delivery boy?*

Shortly after, another message flashed in and he uploaded it straight to Masters, rather than being told to do it. The silence that met the message was unexpected, and curiously, he turned around slowly and watched Masters’ expression, trying to understand what was happening. The Captain, however, was simply listening to Graham.

“I’m sorry, Kirk. You’re the only ship in the quadrant. And you’re carrying the medicine the Arusian ship needs. They’re all sick from the contaminant released in their ship by the Doom attack. The Skullship has been destroyed. Insofar as we can tell, the Doomites were not able to get a distress call out. And even if they did, by the time reinforcements could arrive we’d have back up for you.”

“This crew is not prepared to go that close to the front!” Masters snapped louder than he had intended.

“Captain Masters, there are people on that ship dying. The Arusian Queen is allegedly on that ship. You are the only ship in the area.”

“I thought the Arusian Queen was dead!”

“Maybe her daughter has been crowned. Who cares!” Graham was exasperated. “Kirk, I expect you to go in and help those people. They are part of the Alliance and we cannot simply abandon Arus. They could get, er, the wrong impression about us.”

Masters looked confused but decided not to question. He stood up and turned to the crew. “Well, men, we go to the rescue of the Arusians by order of the Space Marshal. Our cargo is very valuable and must reach its destination intact. I’m counting on you to reach those disabled ships, aid the people and then continue on. Do you think you’re prepared for this?”

The young crew exchanged glances and saluted, affirming “Yes, sir!” in a fervent chorus.

“Very good. Change course to intercept the disabled Arusian ship.” Masters took his chair again and continued to study the charts before him.

“Finally! Some action and excitement!” Lance whispered to Sven.

“Action, yes, but I would hardly call it exciting.” Sven gave him an amused look. “I suppose you need to be a lunatic to see the excitement in this.”

Lance ignored the comment. “You know what I heard? There’s supposed to be royalty on that ship. Maybe even a beautiful Princess.”

“I’m thrilled.” Sven looked bored.

Keith suddenly turned to them, looking annoyed. “Can the chatter, guys .”

A tall red headed figure paced the bridge of a Skullship in annoyance. Although he was almost in his twenties and possessed a strong body, he was well aware that everyone aboard the ship considered him no more than a boy. At his feet were the remains of two mangled bodies of crewmen from an earlier fit of rage. Yurak’s feline eyes watched the Prince’s agitated state with amusement.

“How dare my father send me on some useless errand?!” Lotor growled.

“Perhaps he feels you are not prepared for something bigger, Prince Lotor.” Yurak made no effort to hide the contempt from his voice.

“Shut up, you reject! You are simply here to observe, not talk!” Lotor sneered. “And make sure you report everything back to father!” *I can’t believe my father sent him to baby sit me on this ridiculous outing! This pathetic transport is not worth my talents. I’m wasting precious wenching and aleing time! I only have a week of freedom from the Academy, before my finals start.. Why did my father call me back from Province Eight? I was so content there.*

“Strange that your father would send you to fetch something and not tell you exactly what you’re supposed to get.” Yurak sounded thoughtful, tapping a finger against his chin.

“Tell me something, what part of ‘shut up’ do you not understand, Commander Yurak?” Lotor snarled. “Because I’ll be happy to pound it into your head!”

“I outrank you!” Yurak spat angrily, his limited patience at an end.

“But I am the Crown Prince, dog face. Piss off,” Lotor rebuked.

Yurak locked his jaw and stared hatefully at Lotor. He had not expected the Prince to survive the Academy. He had been under Zarkon's command even before Lotor had been born and he had not believed that the runt would have survived Doom; let alone the Academy. Instead, Lotor had returned to Doom and become the castle's official Royal Pest, being as unpredictable and violent as he was.

"Takes a while, but you can be trained, can't you, puppy?" Lotor tossed his hair back arrogantly, daring Yurak to speak.

Lotor resumed his pacing and grumbling. He had hoped that Yurak would have continued his tirade of being the superior on the ship. Lotor wanted another target to go against and preferably one that would fight back, unlike meek crewmen. The sudden blaring of alarms almost made him jump. He let out a hiss and turned to the astro compass.

"What's the racket about?!"

"Sire, the transport is approaching."

"Good. Wait until they are close enough to see the decoy. Then hit them directly on the first bridge. Make sure their communications are blocked. If anyone tries to escape, you are to retrieve them. It would be nice to bring some slaves home." He turned to Yurak. "And it will probably be more than you have accomplished in the past six months."

Yurak narrowed his eyes in fury.

"Oh, I know all about your failures, Yurak. You don't seem to be able to conquer that worthless planet..." Lotor paused, considering. "...Hell, it's so worthless that I don't even remember the name of it."

"Planet Arus," Yurak supplied.

Lotor blinked flatly at him. "I thought I told you to stifle yourself! You're about as bad Lieutenant Cossack! Weren't you trained to follow orders?!"

Yurak shook with muffled anger. He resented the hybrid more than anything. He knew that Lotor would never have to prove himself to his father, but would instead receive a high position without struggling. He had spent over a century fighting to achieve his current status, and the fact that a half human would surpass him so easily did not sit well with him.

Lotor looked cheekily at him. "Now don't sulk, Yurak, it's not very becoming."

Yurak gave Lotor a curt bow and busied himself with the controls. Lotor watched the Commander, pleased with himself.

"Captain, they're not responding," Keith announced.

The Captain looked grieved. "They might all be sick. Keep trying and keep your eyes on the radar. At the first sign of trouble you are to hyperspace this ship out of here, understood?" He looked meaningfully at Sven.

"Aye, Captain."

Keith continued watching the asteroid belt and the debris scattered around it on the astro compass before him. He scowled, noticing something amiss about their placement. It all looked almost too neat to have been an unexpected attack.

"Does this look weird to you?" Keith asked Sven quietly, showing him the radar view screen.

Sven studied the image for a few moments. A large asteroid was drifting sluggishly but something seemed to be peeking from behind it, and disappearing again.

"Yes," Sven replied in the same muted tone Keith had used. "But it might just be a smaller asteroid behind it. There's a lot of magnetic interference around here."

"Prepare a boarding team with medical staff on it, Akira," Masters interrupted them. "You're going to have to go over and..."

"Aft turret charged and ready to fire, Sire," a Doomite crewman announced.

"Fire!" Lotor commanded.

The laser blast left Lotor's ship with a bright intensity, increasing in diameter as it traveled further from the ship. Its course was stopped by the third bridge of the Esquire Alpha, and the ship began to list dangerously to portside. The explosion set all the alarms off and began a chain reaction of smaller blasts throughout the ship, which had been meant to be used only as a cargo transport.

Keith was about to leave his chair to assess the damage, when a fireball ripped through the first bridge, originating from the helm, and sent everyone down.

“You missed,” Lotor said with a tranquillity foreign to him.

The Doomites looked down and shifted uncomfortably, uncertain as to what their unpredictable Prince was up to.

“So I suppose, we’ll just have to aim again and fire.” Lotor smiled sweetly. “Maybe we can send them a message asking if they would be so kind as to stay put so that the possibility of missing again will be reduced... What do you think of this idea?”

“Er...” Uncertainty met his question.

“I mean, if the target IS still, you can’t possibly miss it by twenty-seven degrees,” Lotor added.

They continued to avert their eyes. Yurak frowned, wondering how Lotor had got the number right. He knew the Prince had not looked at the console for the calculations. Yurak had seen it before the turret was fired but had chosen to ignore it. He would do everything in his power to sabotage Lotor.

“You fools! You missed!” Lotor finally exploded, sending the men scurrying for safety. “Keep firing at the bridge!” Drawing twin swords he severed one man cleanly across the waist and decapitated another. “Do I have to do everything around here?!”

“Ahm... Sire, their auto-shield has surrounded the bridge. We cannot blast through. The ship has lost its engines, though,” another crewmen offered quietly.

“How nice... The engines fell off...” Lotor sounded pleased.

With a serpentine grace, he moved fluidly and swiftly grabbed hold of the man. With his eyes turning red in anger, Lotor pulled out his daggers, preferring to extend the torment this one would feel before death. Moments later, the men fell to the floor, mauled by Prince’s ministrations.

“I don’t care if they’ve lost their engines, you idiot! I wanted that bridge destroyed and you failed!” He turned to the rest of the crew, his face streaked by blood. “You all failed!” He paused. “Get over to that ship! If you haven’t secured it in the next few minutes I will have you all sent to my personal laboratory for me to practice new methods of torture upon! I’m sure Mogor will be very supportive!”

The crewmen scrambled to follow the Prince’s orders.

Keith staggered to his feet, wiping the blood that was oozing down his face from a small wound on his forehead. Coughing at the smoke suspended in the air, like a foul miasma in the bridge, he peered around and saw Sven and Lance first. He crawled over and shook them roughly.

“Sven, cam’on!” Keith called desperately. “You can’t leave me, man.”

“What happened...?” Sven groaned as he sat up slowly.

Lance rolled to his back and looked straight up the ceiling. “Ow... my head.” His voice was toneless.

Keith sighed in relief, seeing that his friends were not seriously injured. He then rushed to the Captain and found him fatally injured, lying in the pool of his own blood, his neck at an impossible angle. Keith tightened his jaw but could not avert his eyes from the brutality that assaulted his senses. He stared at the mangled body with morbid fascination, his mind forming incoherent thoughts.

A beeping noise called his attention and he looked up to see the blip on the radar almost upon the Esquire. Angry, but feeling somewhat relieved, he stood up and shook his head.

“Damn it!” Keith hit a fist on the console and turned to Sven. “What the hell just happened?! This was just a...” He swallowed, and gingerly removed the pins designating the Captain’s rank, before proceeding to remove his own.

“What are you doing, Keith?” Sven demanded, getting up. “What’s wrong?”

“The enemy won’t know which one of us is important enough to keep alive.” He extended his hand, waiting for Sven to hand his rank insignias over. “If they can’t tell us apart, they’ll have to keep us alive, hopefully. This was a set up. They’ve got our signals blocked. Bastards!”

“Why don’t we just obliterate them?” Lance asked, sitting up slowly.

Keith scooted over and took off his insignias. “Because this is a transport and not a battleship. It’s not equipped with guns.”

“That was dumb.” Lance looked disgusted.

“Take the captain to the nearest berth. We’ll catch up with you later,” Keith commanded.

Lance nodded and dragged the Captain off the bridge. Keith pulled Sven over to one of the control terminals and started punching in commands.

“Now what are you doing?”

“We have to lock the cargo just in case anyone tries to get in.”

Sven sighed and complied, though the look on his face revealed his curiosity about the cargo and why it was so important.

Just as Keith finished entering random numbers into the computer, the ship shuddered violently.

“Your attention please, hull breach,” a synthetic voice announced.

“We’re being boarded!” Keith cursed before as he dashed to the intercom. “All hands abandon ship!” He turned back to the console where Sven still stood.

“What do you think you are doing?!” Sven exclaimed, panicked.

Keith turned to him, but the announcement interrupted him. “Self destruct authorisation received, countdown sequence initiated,” the voice emitted as if answering Sven’s question.

Aghast, Sven could only stare at Keith. “You’re mad.”

Keith turned his gaze on him. “Yeah, probably.”

Lotor entered the transport ship with a look akin to disgust on his face. The ship looked outdated, badly maintained and he understood why the shot from the Skullship had caused so much damage. Distractedly, he peered at the layers of hull exposed by the breach and clicked his tongue in disapproval.

His musings were interrupted, however, by the milling of the soldiers around him. Lotor gaped at them briefly in disbelief before unsheathing Mourn and Rue.

“What are you pathetic excuses for life still doing around here?!” Lotor demanded. “Go on! Capture everything that moves in this ship and take it to the slave hold. Yurak, detach a troupe and look for this accursed cargo I’m supposed to find.”

Yurak glared at Lotor’s back. “And you, My Prince, what will you be doing?”

Lotor spun to face him. “I’m going to make sure that you all do your job!” he barked. “Because it seems that nothing gets done unless there’s someone to take you by the hand.”

He swept into the ship, the floor-length, black Academy coat billowing behind him. He could see people scurrying across the ship, trying to escape the Doomites that hunted them down mercilessly. A tall, black haired human tried to run past the soldiers but was stunned and fell heavily to the floor. Another human, that looked like a child, was being dragged roughly by the soldiers.

Lotor then, jumped back, his acute senses warning him of laser blasts coming towards him. The shots missed him and he heard a strangled cry behind him and the unmistakable sound of a body falling to the floor. Lambent eyes focused on the darkened passage they were in and saw another black haired human, this one with longer, dishevelled hair, taking aim again.

“Take that one out,” Lotor commanded, his swords useless in ranged combat.

The human dove across the crossroad and ran off, turning down several corridors, trying to get a lead. He found a good place to hide and waited, hoping the prisoners would be taken down the adjoining hallway.

To his relief, he saw the Esquire’s crew being led by the Doomites towards the Skullship. He jumped out, firing away, but took a blast in the leg, which sent him to the floor. Grinding his teeth against the pain, he continued shooting relentlessly until someone came up behind him and held a gun to his head. He dropped his weapon and raised his hands in grudging surrender. Then whoever it was pistol-whipped him, and he fell.

“Sire, all crew have been secured,” a soldier announced.

Lotor blinked languidly. “I hope, for your sake, you’re not mistaken. I would really hate to get more stains on my uniform.”

The Doomite swallowed nervously, looking at the grim visage of the Prince of Doom in front of him. His handsome face was streaked with blood, as was most of the front of his uniform. His eyes were hard and a dark amber.

“Aye, Sire...” The crewman bobbed his head in a bow and scuttled off.

Lotor followed the entourage of guards to where the prisoners were being kept for his inspection. Any who were acceptable would be loaded onto the Skullship. The guards knew Lotor didn't like taking home anyone who was not capable of hard labour or, in the case of women, attractive enough to join his harem.

Entering the hold, Lotor looked with distaste at the pile of cadavers in a corner. Only eleven of the original crew of the Esquire alive. They were bruised and hovered together as if searching for comfort; their eyes darted between him and the pile of corpses against the wall in horror. Lotor could hear muffled sobs and his lips curved into a snarl of disgust at the weakness of the humans.

"So this lot is what was crewing this floating scrap yard?" Lotor scrutinized the living crew carefully.

"This is all that we could find," Yurak confirmed quietly, afraid of his voice betraying the abhorrence he felt for Lotor.

Lotor looked flatly around as if his mind was having a hard time comprehending something. "My father sent me to capture a shipload of happy daycare students?" He shook his head as if realisation dawned on him in a most unpleasant manner. "He sent ME to hijack a school bus full of sniffing kids?!" He kicked the black haired human who had fired in his direction earlier. He heard bones snapping and felt a small gratification. "What the hell are we going to...?"

"Self destruct authorisation received. Count down sequence at T-minus five minutes," the synthetic voice announced.

"Dandy..." Lotor rolled his eyes. "Which one of you is in charge?"

The crew remained silent, regarding Lotor fearfully. He could see tears streaking several of their faces.

Lotor looked at Yurak. "Perhaps they're too young to speak yet, eh?" He turned back to the crew. "You know, it doesn't matter to me which one of you dies first. Tell me or I will start killing you one by one." He shrugged. "Most unpleasantly I might add..."

Lotor allowed a few seconds to pass before taking a blaster from one of his guards. Pointing it randomly at one of the crew, he fired. There was a collective gasp then Lotor pointed the blaster at his next target, Sven.

"I'm in charge." Keith rolled to his side, his ribs on fire from the kick that had woken him. "Put down the blaster."

"You're in no position to tell me what to do, little boy." But Lotor handed the blaster back anyway, hating the feel of such crude weapon on his hand. "Now turn that damned thing off."

"I don't know how," Keith lied smoothly.

Lotor gave him a flat look. "Is this a human pattern of behaviour? Do you enjoy getting beaten?" He kicked Keith hard on the hip, sending him sprawling awkwardly a short distance away. "It's your prerogative." He grabbed the first person he could reach, and held Pidge up by the hair, bringing Rue, laser shrouded, close to his throat. "Should I kill this insignificant vermin then?" He cocked an eyebrow.

Keith looked at him emotionlessly. "Fine. Just let everyone go."

"Must I remind you that you're in no position to make demands?" Lotor snarled.

Keith locked his jaw. "You're going to have to untie me," he stated.

Lotor regarded him briefly before turning to a Doomite soldier and nodding, commanding him to proceed. He locked his gaze with Keith's and brought Rue closer to Pidge's neck in a warning. Pidge scowled at the pain from the burning of the laser, but he remained unconscious.

Keith felt agony surge through his him as his arms fell free beside him. He clutched his ribs immediately, trying to contain some of the pain and staggered to the control console under Lotor's watchful glare. After tapping in several codes, Keith finally turned back to Lotor and shrugged.

"That's all I can do." Keith pointed to the screen.

"Don't try my patience, boy!" Lotor brought Rue even closer to Pidge, who gasped as the laser began to break the skin.

Keith looked odiously at him. "Only the Captain can terminate the countdown. I've done all I can. I've reset it as far back as it would let me! I swear it. Let him go!"

Lotor cast him a look of contempt and tossed Pidge away, rubbing his hands on his pants as if trying to clean away filth. Pidge landed with a muffled groan on top of Hunk who did not respond.

“And where, pray tell, is your dorm mother...?” Lotor cocked a sardonic eyebrow. “Or rather, the Captain of this preschool bus?”

“He’s gone.”

Keith made a sudden dive for Lotor, catching the Prince off guard. Keith tried desperately to disarm him and cheered to himself as he heard Rue land on the floor. Lotor kicked it away before Keith could grab it and was about to punch Keith when the latter barrelled into his abdomen. Lotor grunted and Keith took the opportunity for another head butt, knocking Lotor off his feet. However, the Prince had grasped him and the two fell to the floor heavily.

They struggled for a few moments, rolling across the floor, before the wall stopped them. Keith managed to throw a few good punches, leaving Lotor with the beginnings of a black eye and a bloody lip. But his lack of experience in physical combat, and the added shock of the events that had occurred, impeded him from causing further damage. Lotor was able to fend off some of the blows, but remained in shock that anyone would be obtuse enough to dare strike at him. The Doom soldiers moved to help Lotor, but stopped when Yurak stepped before them, shaking his head.

“Surely the Prince can handle one child on his own. Leave them be,” Yurak snickered.

Lotor’s anger only increased at the mocking tone. He dealt Keith a well-placed jab in his injured ribs, sending him into a heap on the floor. Lotor kicked him viciously again for good measure before retrieving his sword. Angrily, he sliced it across Keith’s back, leaving a deep, but not fatal wound. Keith cried out only to have Lotor kick him again, rolling him onto his back. Keith was breathing heavily and not moving. Lotor placed his sword at Keith’s face, his eyes blazing with unleashed ire.

Suddenly, however, his eyes calmed and a smile crept over his face. He licked the blood from his lips. “I should finish you off right now, but I won’t. You’ve been the most challenging creature I’ve met to date. Definitely more courageous than Yurak and probably a lot smarter,” he sneered.

Yurak’s eyes widened at the insult and he growled a curse. Lotor shot him a glare to silence him and motioned for the guards to pick up Keith off the floor and hold him up at his eye level.

“Consider the fact that I haven’t killed you an outright a reward. I think father will be happy to have you as an addition to his gladiatorial arena,” Lotor said in a calculative tone. “I certainly will enjoy watching you being ripped apart by the robeasts, limb by limb.”

Keith glanced up at Lotor and spat on his face. Sven and Lance both cringed and shook their heads at Keith’s stubbornness, used as they were to their spoiled friend. Lotor blinked in an eldritch manner, eyes alit with raw fury, and grabbed Keith by the throat, crushing it slowly.

“I could kill you so easily, little boy.” Lotor suddenly smiled, enjoying the sound of Keith’s choking and the feel of skin giving under his pressure. “You’re so pathetically frail... I would enjoy watching your tears drip dry for days on end... Perhaps I will amuse myself with you. I have devised quite a few interesting implements of torture.”

“Don’t kill him, please!” Lance begged.

Oh shut up! Keith thought, irritated. *At least let me die with some dignity.*

Amused, Lotor looked over his shoulder. “And why not?”

“He knows... stuff!” Lance cringed.

Sven elbowed Lance roughly, rolling his eyes. “Idiot! Now he’ll be sure to torture him,” he whispered harshly.

“I couldn’t think of anything else,” Lance muttered sheepishly.

Lotor smiled, genuinely amused. “So... he knows... stuff? Hum...” He nodded at the guard who, nonchalantly, dropped Keith to the floor. Lotor then turned to the Doomites. “Lock those kids up and load the cargo onto our ship. I trust you can do that without me having to oversee everything?” He cast Yurak a withering look, arching an eyebrow. “And you can stop trying to slither away like a worm,” he said to Keith, who was backing away. “Take him off, too.”

“Nice going,” Keith snapped at Lance once they had been left alone.

Lance shrugged. “I did it for my Colony.”

Sven screwed up his face and looked at Lance. “What?!”

Lance looked thoughtful. "Yeah. Colony Base N.A.," he proclaimed proudly. "I'm sure you would have done the same for yours."

"What do the Colonies have to do with this?" Keith asked getting as confused as Sven.

"Well, I suppose nothing really, but what the hey! People used to say that on Earth when they lived there, so why not say it now too?"

Sven scowled, deciding to quit the debate. Lance had majored in History and was well aware of what had happened on Earth long before their time. He knew that Earth had once sustained life. The Colonies had been continents or countries on the planet before the need to move from Earth emerged. The people built colonies in outer space to reflect their original land. However, he was not versed with the custom of human culture while still grounded.

"So, how do we get out?" Lance asked.

Keith frowned. "Why are you asking me?"

"You always have brilliant ideas. Why not one now?"

Keith rolled his eyes.

Hunk, who had woken up, joined them. "These bulkheads are not really up to par, you know. If I can get Pidge to wake up, he can hack through the security codes and I can force the doors open."

Keith nodded, feeling numb. Despite the endurance and defiance he had shown earlier, he was not fairing well at all. He had come from a groomed family, never known hardships and been raised as if he were a prince. Witnessing the gore and violence displayed by the Doomites was more than he had ever expected to see. During his years at the Alliance Academy, he had studied books about the Drule and Doom races, their aggressive, brutal and merciless natures. However, he had never expected to observe it first hand. Leaning against a wall, he was cruelly ill and then collapsed to the floor unconscious.

Lotor joined the guards who were trying to penetrate the cargo hold. Yurak looked at him acidly and shook with livid anger. Lotor regarded him with a raised eyebrow, his lips curved into a daring snarl. Yurak broke the gaze, afraid of his ire getting the best of him. He was almost certain that Zarkon would not punish him too severely for eliminating his son, a child the King didn't care much for. However, he also knew that the old King had no intentions of producing and training another heir and killing the Prince of Doom would probably result in his death, since the crime would be against the Crown.

Getting bored, Lotor pushed the closest guard to him. "Come on! You can't tell me that door is holding up against the cutters! I want to get off this stinking ship now! I want to go home and rest. I never wanted to spend my reading week running silly little errands for my father!"

Yurak took the opportunity to mock Lotor from behind.

Lotor's eyes narrowed and the guard stepped away. However, it wasn't the guard that had his attention, but Yurak. The Prince had caught the display in his peripheral vision and spun to the side. Unsheathing Mourn, he had it at Yurak's neck within heartbeats.

"Piss off, dogface. I never wanted you to come along in the first place!" Lotor barked.

Yurak eyed the sword carefully before looking back at Lotor. "And you think I wanted to babysit you?"

With a quick move, Lotor whirled and sheathed Mourn. The motion, however, had caused the sword to nick Yurak's chest. Yurak had no doubts that it had been intentional. He had watched Lotor fight and knew him to be a formidable swordsman.

"And do you really think I need baby sitting?" Lotor smirked over his shoulder at Yurak. "Get a life, reject."

"Prince Lotor, your schooling has taught you well, but pray tell, why have you not asked the Commander to open this door? Perhaps you missed that lecture on interrogation of higher-ranking prisoners?" Yurak questioned sardonically.

How the hell did he know that?! Lotor thought, upset. So I skipped a few classes and Hazer covered for me. So what?!

He turned angrily at Yurak, his pale face tinged red. "Do you honestly think that stubborn little ass will help us get to his precious cargo? I can't be bothered dirtying my hands torturing the bastard! If you think it's such a good plan, you do it!!" He locked his jaw, resentful that Yurak had thought of the idea.

Yurak smiled devilishly at having frustrated Lotor. "Is that a command, Sire?"

"Get out of my sight, you freak!" Lotor snarled. "Get that brat to give you the code if you want! I don't care! I want to go home!"

Yurak saluted and turned to leave. "I wanna go home!" He repeated mockingly when he knew he was far enough from Lotor to outrun him if necessary.

Lotor reached for the shaft of his boot and withdrew a dagger. With a swift motion, he threw it so that it hit the wall just inches from Yurak's face.

"When we return to Doom, be assured that I will convince my father to have you patrolling the coldest chunk of ice in the universe... on foot!"

Keith woke with a start and looked up at Lance, who had been shaking him. Sven shifted quickly to their side, looking worriedly at him. Keith pushed them away, embarrassed by his show of weakness.

"I'm alright," Keith announced.

"Maybe you should let Baker look at those broken ribs and cut," Hunk suggested.

Keith scowled at the unwanted attention and at the sound of crying. His mind was still reeling in shock from seeing his first battle as well as the abuse his body had suffered in such a short period of time.

"Lance, go grab some tape from Baker for my ribs. I'll be okay," he added, seeing Lance's frown. "Hunk, have you figured the door yet?"

"Yeah. All's ready."

"Good, wait for the signal." He turned to Baker. "How's everyone?" he asked, knowing she was a doctor.

"Other than a little shaken and bruised, they're fine," Baker replied.

"Good." Keith cringed slightly as Lance began to tape him up. "Guys! Shut up! We're going to get out of here, alright? Snivelling about it isn't going to help! Ow!" He glared at Lance, who was a little rough in his medical care. Lance shrugged innocently. "Now when that door opens, I want you guys to make your way to the launch area. There's a small fighter there. Enough room for all of you. Sven, I want you piloting, got it?"

"Check," Sven responded.

Keith nodded. "You're the only one who's quick enough on the controls to make the hyper jump without getting hit. Once you get out of the launch bay, make a break for the asteroid field."

Sven looked nervous but did not argue.

"But the fighter can only carry nine... That leaves one out," Lance argued.

Keith smirked, some of his natural arrogance surfacing. "I've got Phantom with me. Being a Vice-Admiral's son has its perks, don'tcha know."

Lance rolled his eyes.

"Since we've worked everything out..." Hunk stepped towards the door. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get out of here!" He went to the panel by the door.

"Hold! Someone's coming," Pidge announced. "Quiet."

"Hunk, close the panel and get back here," Keith ordered.

Yurak walked in, followed by two armed guards and left more at the entrance to the cell. The bulkhead slammed shut behind them with a loud echo. Yurak nodded to the guards, who began to herd the prisoners into the corner. Just as Keith began to move with them, Yurak stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

"No, not you, kid. I need to have a word with you." Yurak cracked his knuckles, and punched his fist into his hand, trying to intimidate Keith.

Keith swallowed involuntarily, and looked up at Yurak nervously.

"You're going to tell me the code to unlock the cargo," Yurak stated simply.

"But I don't know it..." Keith began.

Yurak picked up Keith by the shirt and slammed him against the wall roughly. "Don't try my patience, boy. You're the only one who could have locked down the cargo."

Keith strained not to cry out in pain. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Yurak slapped Keith hard across the face. "Look. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. It's entirely up to you. I know you locked it down. It's obvious you did it."

Yurak held Keith's chin up so that he could look at him in the eyes. Keith remained silent for a moment, then spat in Yurak's face. At the other end of the room, both Sven and Lance shook their heads sadly.

“This one has spirit. I’m going to enjoy breaking it. Guards take him into the next cell and chain him up.” Yurak laughed.

One of the guards took Keith from Yurak and half led, half dragged him out.

Lotor, bored by the soldiers trying to cut open the door, began to wander around the ship looking for something interesting. He found a computer terminal that wasn’t affected by the explosions, and began a random search in the data base. He finally came across a set of the ship’s schematics that caused his eyes to light up, their grimness lost by the find.

Finally. Something interesting to look at... He smiled, and then frowned as he scanned through the blueprints. *Five sets of titanium alloy doors?! It will take us weeks to cut through them! Argh!* His eyes began to run through the next set of blueprints quickly. *Interesting... this ship’s cargo hold is a separate entity. It’s held down by clamps and electromagnetic fields. Hmm, maybe... Damn! What kind of imbecile would lock down the hold with that many computers? Stupid Alliance engineers! They don’t realise how inefficient that really is! If one computer malfunctions during a detachment, then the cargo hold will not release! It would be far more efficient to have one computer control with several security codes... oh well... humph! It would be easier to just blow this ship up and tell father we misfired! I wish I knew what the hell is so damned important about this cargo that he needs me to bring it back intact. Hmm.* Lotor’s brow creased in concentration at his next find. *Interesting. The cargo-hold records have a glitch in them. That usually means someone has been doing some unauthorised changes to the records...*

Lotor sighed loudly, and got up from the terminal. He walked back to the cargo hold doors, his boots clicking hollowly with each step. He glared hatefully at the bulkheads.

“Are any of you competent enough to understand a computer?” Lotor asked the guards.

One of them mustered courage and stepped forward. “Aye, Sire! I do.”

“Fine. You try breaking the code to open the doors while the others continue to cut through.” Lotor looked uninterested as soon as the orders had left his mouth.

“Aye Sire!” The guard saluted and set off to work.

This is so pathetically boring that I’m afraid if I start to yawn, I’ll never be able to stop again, Lotor sighed loudly. *Lotor, do this! Lotor do that! What the hell does he think I am? His personal maid? I really should have changed my name.* He gave his father a mental raspberry. *What he needs is a good lay.* He frowned and began to walk away. *Then again, every time he puts women in his harem they are dead within days. Maybe they die of fright. I suppose I would too if I saw him naked...* Lotor shuddered. *Good grief, I don’t believe I just thought that. I think... what was that spooky story mother used to tell us?* He stopped and stared vacantly around. *Ah yes, he continued on his way, the Creature of the Black Lagoon. That thing was probably more attractive to look at than my father. I’m still curious to know how I turned out to be so beautiful. Mother must have had some STRONG genes!*

Hunk groaned and got up. “We just can’t leave him in there! We’ve got to get out and help him!”

Sven looked flatly at him. “The guards are right outside the door. There are at least four of them out there. How do you propose we get past?”

Lance smirked, “They’re not expecting us to be able to open the door from this side...”

“That’s all fine and dandy, but once we’re out, how are we going to save Keith?” Pidge asked.

“Shhh! Listen...” Sven scowled.

Through the walls they could hear Yurak’s muffled voice. A few moments later, they heard the cracking of a whip and a cry of pain from Keith.

“Hunk, get that door open!” Sven’s tone held grim determination.

“Oh crap... Pidge, I need you on this one...” Hunk cursed.

“Wussup?” Lance cocked his head.

“When I slammed the panel shut, the computer reset itself... I need Pidge to convince the computer that everything’s cool, and then I can do it... Besides, we’ve got to give those guards a surprise when these doors open...” Hunk smiled mischievously. “I can’t be working on that and reprogramming the computer at the same time.

Lance nodded and cringed as another muted scream reached them through the wall. He could only imagine in what state Keith would be in. Despite the fact that he had always found Keith hard to get along with because of his spoiled upbringing and resultant arrogance, he had developed a deep affinity with him nevertheless.

Lotor continued on his aimless walk around the ship, utterly shocked that it was still holding together. He had paused to inspect several spots and had been surprised to see that the Alliance ships were more poorly constructed than the Skullships. That the craft was in space, and as far from the Milky Way Galaxy as it was, stunned him to the very roots of his hair.

Still he walked on, glad to be alone, until he heard a rather loud howl of pain. He had walked into the detention block without noticing. He peered into an open cell curiously. Yurak was red with anger, the whip in his hands soaked in blood. Keith was chained to a wall, barely conscious.

“Tell me, you little runt, or I swear I’ll rip you to shreds!” Yurak bellowed.

It was obvious Keith was in a lot of pain and his voice was barely audible. “I told you already! I don’t know the code! I just put in a random alphanumeric sequence.”

Lotor entered the cell and sneered. “Oh please! Don’t tell me you can’t get a simple code out of a little boy!”

Yurak spun around, not having heard Lotor enter the cell. “Humph! I can so!”

Keith looked deliriously at Lotor. “I don’t have a code! I just pushed all the keys at once!”

Lotor regarded Keith. “So you randomised the code, eh? You’re definitely smarter than you look.” A yawn escaped him. “So, do you know anyone on this stinking heap of space junk that would know how to crack the code? Surely you have a programmer on board this ship.” *And grant me the chance to go home before I spontaneously combust out of sheer boredom ...* He scowled. *I wonder if it’s possible. It certainly would prove interesting.*

Keith looked upset and in agony. “No, you killed him along with the Captain.”

“Well, this wearies me.” Lotor heaved a sigh. “Yurak, leave this one alone. I don’t want to bring father a gift that’s useless. If you keep beating on him, he won’t have the energy to play with the robeasts for father’s amusement.”

“You can’t be serious!” Yurak snarled. “Bringing this child into the arena would prove to be nothing more than a waste of the King’s time and robeast fodder.”

“Yurak, you’re a fool if you can’t see the potential in this creature. Go away. Leave me with him. I am seriously beginning to doubt that you have the brains to do anything right!” Lotor’s eyes were beginning to shade towards red as Yurak’s questioning.

Yurak lifted a hand to protest “How dare you...”

“I will dare anything!” Lotor unsheathed his twin swords just enough so that the gleam of the metal reflected in Yurak’s eyes. “I am the Prince. Now get out of my face before I turn you into nothing more than a stain on this floor!” *Oh please stay here and let me do it.*

Yurak growled something incoherent and left with the guards, much to Lotor’s disappointment, turning back only to shoot Lotor a bitter look.

Lotor turned back to Keith. “How many digits did you put into the code?”

“A hundred digits or more, but then I doubt you can count that high.” Keith glared at him.

Lotor laughed out right. *Stubborn and defiant. Reminds of me. He’s not godlike like me, but definitely the most interesting human I’ve met so far.* “How droll, little boy. Do you honestly think you’re going to get anywhere by being defiant to me, of all people? Do you realise who you’re dealing with?” *Can you fathom what I had to do to earn this uniform I’m wearing... Come to think of it, I think I only did it cuz I would stand out in the crowd. No one else earned it.*

“Do you think I honestly care?” Keith spat blood at the floor, realising that if he continued to push the Prince he would get even more injured. “You’re a bastard and a damn asshole.”

Like a coiled snake, Lotor punched Keith brutally across the face and grabbed him by the neck. He enjoyed the feel of the frail body-part giving in so easily under his strength.

“Don’t you ever take that tone with me!” Lotor snapped.

The whole point of him, foolish Yurak, is he’s stubborn. Humph. Father can be just as foolish, and will probably think as you do. So when we do throw this creature into the arena,

he'll definitely surprise father with his spirit. Lotor regarded Keith closely. The human was in pain, but doing everything he could not to show it. *I can tell this one is going to amuse father for quite a while. He may even survive if given his preferred weapon. It's really a shame. I can see so much fight in this human. He would make a good soldier, and perhaps even a captain. But it would be too much bother to try and convert him to our side. And since father has not given me my own command yet, he would definitely go to waste. This human shows so much potential, removing his men's rank insignias so that we would waste our time trying to pump information out of an ensign, or a cadet! And randomising the code to a hundred characters, something that would take the best decoders at least three days! He is definitely not as stupid as most humans. I wonder if he changed the cargo hold records. Perhaps the thing we are after isn't in there after all. I wouldn't put it past him.* Lotor looked up at Keith, as if he were staring through him.

"So, where is the cargo anyway?" Lotor asked casually.

Crap! Keith thought frantically. *How did he know about that? I hope Hunk and Pidge didn't spill the beans about taking out the key components from the hold and hiding them in the floorboards.* He looked at Lotor indifferently. "What cargo?"

I would hate to play Poker with him. He's good! But then, I'm better... Lotor thought and gave Keith a look of impatience. "Don't toy with me. I know you have the cargo moved elsewhere. Tell me where, so I don't have to kill another one of your insignificant playmates!" He paused. "Not that I would mind that too much. I do enjoy the odd game of darts... Women can scream particularly loud."

Damnit, he's got to be bluffing! Keith thought, trying to deny to himself that such extensive degree of cruelty existed. *He doesn't even know what we're carrying, otherwise he would have stated it outright, instead of calling it 'cargo'.* "I don't know what you're talking about. We only have medical supplies and spare parts for the science stations. They're all in the hold."

Oh for the love of...! Wait a second! I've got him now... Lotor tried not to smirk. "But why would a bunch of spare parts and medical supplies require such drastic measures to protect it? Hmmm?" he asked almost sweetly.

Uh oh. Think fast, Keith... Ahh yes, of course. Keith gave Lotor a look of defeat. "If I tell you and help you get at it, will you let my crew go?" *Please believe me, cam'on, you're a Doomite, you're supposed to be dumb!*

"Most definitely," Lotor replied well naturedly. *Yeah right. The day I let potential slaves go free is the day my father takes up ballet as a career. Besides, I know you're still going to lie to me. Like I don't know the oldest trick in the book...* he muttered to himself.

Keith sighed. "They're not medical supplies. They're chemicals used in biological warfare. Highly toxic and excessively valuable on the black market, okay?"

Lotor smiled. *↑ see.* *Oh PUH-lease! Do you really think I'm going to swallow that load of crock? Don't insult my intelligence! Like you little Alliance kiddies would dare carry out such contraband. Bah! Even I would think twice! You're carrying something that my father wants, so stop feeding me this bull about goods for the black market!* He turned and walked away. *Just for that, I'm going to let you watch as I break every single one of your little friends. The light haired human woman looked particularly enticing. I think I'll keep her for a while.*

"What about our deal?" Keith demanded.

"What deal? I don't know what you're talking about. Besides, I don't make deals with slaves." Lotor raised a petulant eyebrow at Keith and left. *Yes, you would definitely be a good addition to my army. Perhaps you'll still be alive and well when I graduate and obtain my own command. By then you should have learnt respect.*

"Why! You lying scum bag!" Keith cursed.

Lotor poked his head around the door and looked at Keith. "You lie, I lie." He winked and Keith could hear the sound of his boots growing fainter.

Who does that whelp think I am? He's probably used to those ignorant soldiers my father keeps around or those stupid Drules. Trying to play me for a fool! Lotor huffed. *I really oughtta...*

His musings were interrupted as a bulkhead suddenly blasted open in front of him. The guards jumped on him, trying to shield him against the debris. The sudden explosion, and subsequent reaction of the Doomites, came as a surprise to Lotor and he fell, hitting his head. Stunned and laying on the floor under the soldiers, Lotor failed to see the crew of the Esquire escaping and disarming the guards.

Lance and Sven rushed over to the adjacent cell to free Keith while Lotor began to regain his senses. Hunk heard a groan and pushed the guards away enough to reveal Lotor trapped under their combined weight and part of the bulkhead.

“Don’t move.” Hunk pointed the gun to his head.

“Keith,” Sven gasped, “your back...”

“It’s not as bad as it looks. Untie me quick!” Keith instructed.

Sven pushed Lance towards Keith. “Go to it, thief.” Sven went back to the door to keep a watch.

Lance snorted, but pulled produced of lock picks from his pockets. “I’ll have you out in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

Keith almost collapsed when his wrists were freed. “Okay, let’s move out.”

He skidded to a stop outside upon seeing the pile of guards, bulkhead and Lotor. Keith tried desperately not to laugh, but a chuckle did escape him. Lotor shook the last of the dizziness away, and commenced, without much success, to push the two bulky guards off himself. Keith’s mirth changed, the strain of the events eclipsing his sanity, and he snatched the laser rifle from Hunk and aimed it at Lotor.

“You bastard!” Keith yelled. “You’re going to pay for this.”

“Get these oafs off of me this instant!” Lotor commanded.

“Dude, what are you doing? Let’s get going!” Lance looked worried.

“No. He’s going to pay for killing Captain Masters...” Keith shook with anger.

Sven put his hand on the rifle, over the power settings and changed it from kill to stun, unnoticed by Keith. “He’s not worth it.”

Keith jerked away from Sven. “Die, you Doom bastard!” He shot just as Hunk and Lance pulled him back.

Lotor snarled in pain as the blast hit his arm and anger alone was the only remedy keeping him from being stunned by the gun.

In the pandemonium that erupted, Hunk accidentally pushed Keith in the ribs, and Keith crumbled in a heap on the floor, shrieking in pain. His screams, combined with Lotor’s shout of rage and obscenities echoed through the corridor. Lance quickly rolled one of the guards over top of Lotor’s face to quiet him while Sven clamped his hand over Keith’s mouth. They strained to hear, but no one seemed to have heard.

“They must think he’s still torturing the commander,” Hunk concluded.

“It’s a good thing too. Come on, let’s get moving.” Sven locked his jaw.

At the first junction from the brig, Keith stopped and looked at everyone. “Okay guys, I’ll cover you as far as corridor seven. Then you’re on your own. Sven, you scout ahead.” He began to walk down the hallway, keeping an eye on Sven for any sign of trouble.

“But where are you going?” Hunk demanded.

“I got some things to take care of before I leave,” Keith confessed hesitantly.

Lance looked at him suspiciously but did not question the Deputy Captain’s orders. Sven shook his head and followed the others down the corridor.

Well, first I gotta get the key components, and take those with me, at least, Keith thought as he moved through the ship. It’s a good thing that I moved the cargo earlier. Those stupid Doomites are trying to breach that hold and it’s not there. Idiots.

Lotor curled as tightly as he could under the weight and sprang out. Bodies and the bulkhead were pushed away violently from him and Lotor stared with round eyes at the spectacle.

What the hell just happened? I couldn’t possibly have... He felt dizzy suddenly and the magical bracers and ring he wore began to pulse, feeling as if they would burn into his skin. Did these things perform magic for me? He wondered bewildered. And why do I feel like the day when father killed that King ... and the day Lupus... he swallowed involuntarily. ...Left me...?

He stood up, looked at his throbbing arm and saw the damage on the coat. There was a large bruise from the gun’s charge marring his skin. *He showed enough audacity to defy me. Now he’ll sleep with the dead.* Lotor shook his hair back. *He seems to be blessed with luck; therefore I will simply kill him. I do not want to risk another chance of him escaping.*

The disabled ship’s light dimmed even more. Blinking languidly, Lotor’s eyes gained their lambency and he could see sharply again. He remained perfectly still, barely breathing,

just listening to the sounds around him. Finally, he could distinguish footsteps growing fainter in the distance. He smiled predatorily.

It's show time.

Something deep within him flared and enveloped him, further aiding his plans.

Keith entered the first bridge and began to collect the dog tags and insignias strewn on the floor. His heart ached more than the physical punishment he had undergone. His face, however, was stoic; he would not cry or break under the misery he had been forced to live through. He would prove to his family, especially his mother, that he was capable of surviving on his own.

Reaching under the floorboards, he grabbed the key elements of the cargo they were transporting. He would never be able to fit the massive weapon into his jet fighter, but if he saved at least these parts, it would save Garrison a great deal of time and money.

He gazed at the ridiculously small parts and laughed tiredly, amazed that so much had been lost for something that could fit on the palm of his hands. He shook as his laughter ended with a strangled sob and he sat down heavily, trying to regain his poise.

They're all dead because of me. This wasn't supposed to happen. He sighed and shook his head. *Perhaps I should quit this ship before it's too late.*

Keith stopped in mid step as a loud, guttural roar echoed through the corridor. He scowled, knowing that he really did not wish to meet the owner of that voice, but had a definite idea of who he was.

If he's on my trail, I don't think I'll be able to outrun him, Keith thought upset.

"We meet." The snarl came from everywhere around Keith.

He looked up and around but could not see Lotor anywhere. In a blind panic, he rushed through the ship, in a mad dash towards its bowels, trying desperately to get away from Lotor, whom he could only hear but not see.

I wonder if I'm going to make it there on time. Damn that bastard, he's fast! He's going to catch me by the time I get to Phantom. I've got to do something else... maybe... Keith changed direction and began to make his way to one of the cargo areas instead of Phantom.

He entered an empty cargo hold, breathing heavily, but continued running until he reached the far end. There, as he had expected, he found a small consol with two buttons. Holding on to the bar on the wall, he turned around to face the bulkhead.

At that moment, Lotor seemed to emerge out of thin air and charged in. He stopped briefly and scanned the dimly lit room. His golden eyes shone in the umbrae and he saw Keith easily, as if the room was, in actuality, well lit. With a gruff roar, he dashed forward, unsheathing the twin swords. Their laser casings were off and both of their double edges looked optimally honed.

Keith looked unfazed at the barbarian-like creature coming towards him. He held the bar tightly and hit one of the buttons.

Lotor cursed quite fluently when he suddenly found himself weightless, floating through the air towards the ceiling. He glared at Keith momentarily, before turning himself upside down to meet the ceiling with his feet. Whatever it was that he had been doing to aid him hunt Keith was now forgotten to him. Anger took control over his concentration and he could no longer will the paranormal phenomena to happen.

Once on the ceiling, however, Lotor crouched and began to work his way towards Keith, using the rough, porous surface to gain hold.

Keith cursed, though not quite as well as Lotor. He had half expected Lotor to be trained in zero-G; however, he had not expected him to be so resourceful. He saw the gigantic spider-like form moving towards him, still gripping both swords. He pulled out his laser blaster and aimed, but stopped when he thought of the consequences.

Damn it. If this bar gives, I'll be flinging into every bulkhead if I use this... Keith looked around quickly. All he found was a rod, the same length as the double bladed sword he was proficient with.

Damn that insolent brat! Lotor growled as he saw Keith push off the bar.

Lotor crouched lower and propelled himself towards Keith. Twin swords led his trajectory in a cross, ready to decapitate the smaller form, who was perpendicular to the floor, reaching for something.

Keith sensed more than saw the approach. He turned his body expectedly, bringing the long metal rod up and using it as a poleaxe to deflect the downward move of the deadly swords. To his surprise, the metal held without being too damaged.

The impact, however, sent them both away from each other. Keith slammed against a massive box and Lotor against a column. They measured each other warily. Keith had, by that point, forgotten about the pain from his ribs and other recently obtained wounds; the excitement of combat pouring adrenaline into his body.

As one, they moved towards each other again. Lotor brought one blade low and the other high, intending to disarm Keith quickly and kill him. Keith saw the move for what it was and feigned his own, as if unaware of Lotor's intentions. At the last moment, he brought the poleaxe into an angle and caught Mourn coming downwards with one end of the pole, and Rue coming upwards with the other end.

Lotor spun and curled his legs and blades close to him. He then lashed out, flipped in the air and brought both blades flying in opposite directions in two deadly horizontal arches. Keith leapt back, bringing the pole in a forward thrust, meeting the blades as they crossed one another. The impact sent both combatants away from each other with numbed arms and a metallic echo reverberating through the large space.

That was just dumb! Lotor thought, annoyed.

They regarded one another briefly. Keith knew Lotor was going to keep on the offensive unless he turned the tables, and disregarding the throbbing in his arms, he lunged towards Lotor. The latter brought one of the blades up while keeping the other with the hilt at waist level, tip down. He met Keith's onslaught with the grace of a feline. Keith smiled grimly, having finally met an opponent who offered him a challenge in melee combat.

One end of the pole met the flat of a blade, while the other end concluded in the same standoff. This impasse brought them close to one another; lambent amber eyes narrowed, emitting the rage Lotor was under. Black eyes remained blank, Keith deciding not to give his adversary any clue about his state of mind.

Unexpectedly, Keith noticed Lotor's eyes go completely calm.

Uh oh...

Lotor kicked Keith hard on the chest before he was able to finish his thought and flipped in the air amused.

This is like the zero-G training at the Academy. If I was fighting Hazar this would be more fun. He always enjoys fighting while suspended in the air. And nothing is better than fighting upside down.

Keith saw the box coming towards him, or rather, him going towards it, with all the intention of causing more injury to his already battered form. He flipped himself and kicked off the box, using the momentum to go towards Lotor; poleaxe aimed to hit the Prince hard in the stomach.

Seeing his predicament and knowing that he wouldn't be able to move out of the way in time, Lotor took the defensive. He moved up as far as he could, all the while watching Keith, judging his distance and speed. As the poleaxe came within a few feet from him, he kicked out, perched on the tip of the pole and using that as a footstep, threw himself upwards.

It had the effect that he hoped for. Keith flew down, pushed by Lotor, but landed on his feet and jumped back up again, this time using a different strategy. Whereas the pole could reach Lotor before the latter's sword could reach him, this also gave Lotor the advantage of using the weapon against him.

Keith flew up like a cannon ball, curled up, with the pole close to his body horizontally. Lotor turned himself upside down and smirked at the tight-balled form coming towards him.

Utilising the same move as Lotor had, Keith sprung out, bringing the pole out and wide. Lotor saw the feign and brought the swords in a protective cross. The pole came up towards his head, and he brought one blade down to block, while chopping down with the other. Keith brought one end of the pole and parried the blow. Again, the impact sent them away from one another.

An explosion outside the ship startled both men. Someone had opened fire on the ship. They could hear the shockwave stressing the hull plates in the cargo bay. Another explosion shook the ship violently.

The impacts had caused them to be tossed about the hold carelessly. Lotor hit the massive box at an awkward angle, and dropped Rue. He saw the sword began to move on its own and looked up, alarmed. A sliver of a hole could be barely discerned on the wall. It was still harmless, but the breach would expand in proportion rapidly.

As he was about to lunge for the fallen blade, the integrity of the hull collapsed and a gaping maw formed in the cargo hold. Rue was sucked into the void.

"Nooo!" Instinctively Lotor gripped to the edge of the box precariously and he knew it would be only a matter of time before he followed his sword's fate.

Keith had used the pole as a propeller and had reached the bar by the console again. He saw Lotor's quandary, and knew that all he had to do was extend the pole and Lotor would be relatively safe. He saw Lotor looking in anguish after his lost blade, his hair flying madly in the wind.

I'm going to regret this. I just know it. Something tells me that letting him go would be the best thing to do, but I can't just let him die! Damn it! Lance would have helped him out the hole! I just know I am going to regret this...

"Grab hold, quick!" He extended the end of the pole to Lotor.

Lotor's head snapped up to look at Keith. A moment passed, with Lotor looking out the breach and back at Keith, before he finally reached up and grabbed hold of the pole. It took much effort on Keith's part to pull Lotor to the safety beyond the first operational bulkhead. He took hold of Lotor's wrists, and with a pained noise, pulled Lotor past the threshold and kicked the button to close the doors.

"Are you alright?" Keith asked.

"No," Lotor replied despondently.

"Look. I know you've got your orders and I've got mine." He looked at the timer. "We've got three minutes before this ship blows to high heaven. Let's get going!"

"Whatever." Lotor shrugged indifferently, not questioning why the detonation sequence had been reset.

Keith pulled Lotor to his feet. "Come on! That sword is not worth dying over!"

Lotor snapped out his depression and snarled. "How would you know?! You bastard. It's all your fault!"

"Look. We have got to get out of here now! If you don't leave, you won't have a chance to find that sword again. Let's go!"

"I need the cargo! My father will murderise me!" He looked even more distressed than before.

Keith regretfully handed Lotor the bag he had been carrying. "Here. This was all you could find. We dropped the rest of the cargo off before you intercepted us."

Lotor scowled at Keith in confusion. "But why?"

"Because you're stalling us, let's go! And besides, it's not like you're going to tell Garrison what I did, nor am I ever going to tell your father what really happened. Moreover, it's not likely we'll ever meet again anyway. Let's move!"

"What do you care if I live or die?"

Keith looked mystified, "I don't know. Maybe because I don't believe anyone deserves to die. As for why I'm helping you...Ah hell. Let's go!"

Lotor followed Keith blindly. The two paused for a moment at the corridor junction; one leading to the airlock where Keith's F16 fighter sat, the other leading to the gangplank that Lotor had boarded the ship through.

"Uhm..." Keith fidgeted awkwardly.

Lotor felt just as uncomfortable. Aside from Hazar, he had never known anyone to be kind. "Uhm... Good-bye?"

Keith extended his hand and watched almost amused as Lotor regarded it suspiciously, before taking it. "It was a good fight. I'm sorry we couldn't finish it."

"A shame. Perhaps one day I'll find my sword and we'll conclude it." Lotor smirked. "Don't worry, I'll look for you. I promise you will die by my left hand wielding Rue."

Keith chuckled. "I'll be waiting."

Lotor and Keith turned and ran, Lotor towards his ship, and Keith towards the launch area.

Yurak met Lotor in the bridge of the Skullship nervously, surprised at seeing him there. "Sire! You're alive!"

"Warp!" Lotor barked. As the ship concluded its time/distance leap, Lotor regarded Yurak carefully. "You! You were the one who opened fire on the ship! Why?"

"We thought it would be a more efficient way to open the cargo hold," Yurak stammered, his face damp with sweat.

Lotor's eyes were glowing with rage. He reached instinctively for his twin swords, and paused when he found Rue's scabbard empty. He glared furiously at Yurak; angry at losing his blade and enraged with Yurak's apparent treason.

"I told you we would do this my way! And this was all the cargo in the ship!" Lotor tossed the bag at Yurak violently, sending him to the floor.

He stood over Yurak, breathing heavily in his rage. His eyes looked almost red from the ire he was feeling. He stepped on Yurak's throat to hold him down and in a slow and deliberate movement, he brought Mourn down, piercing Yurak's eye with a carving motion. Lotor stepped away off Yurak and smiled at the howls of pain. Lotor then turned to the Doom soldiers.

"Take that treasonous dog out of my sight. Throw him in the slave cells until we get back to Doom." He began to walk out of the bridge. "Oh, and do clean up this mess."

Keith took off in Phantom just in time to escape the explosion, his hyper drive engines engaging almost immediately after take off. He reached the base within a few minutes, and landed his fighter beside the shuttle from the Esquire.

As Keith got up to leave the cockpit, the twenty-five dog tags fell from his uniform pocket. Keith blinked at them, confused for a moment. He then sat back down in the cockpit, head buried in his hands, sobbing, finally able to release some of the torment he was feeling.