

Acknowledgement: Inspired by “Westward Bound”, by Patty.

Warning: ANGST, Violence and mild language.

Prologue

The hybrid Drule bowed deeply before the Queen. He stood erect once again and met her eyes. “It has been arranged. You are to move all the units to ninety/two-forty quadrant and annihilate it.”

“Why do you request my help? I know you to be powerful enough to eliminate that dainty target on your own.”

“It would not be politically savvy.” The man smiled, amused. “I am sure you understand that.”

“And what’s in it for me?”

“The planet will be yours to raid. Do with it as you will. Just remember to spare the Prince. He must not die.”

“What’s his importance?” the Queen queried.

“That is of no concern to you, Your Majesty. Simply do as we agreed.”

“And the King?”

“He can be eliminated.” The man’s eyes flickered. “Why do you question this so much? We have already agreed to the plan and the fee that you are to receive. Are you afraid now?”

The Queen exchanged a glance with her General. He looked as though he was expecting only a simple nod from her to impale the hybrid with his sword.

“I still do not understand why you wish us to eliminate the ninety/two-forty quadrant. It is no secret that you’re powerful enough to do it. And as for your lame excuse of political endeavours... since when does your type know of such thing?”

“T’is not for you to question my reasons.” The hybrid’s eyes were alight with mischief. “Simply do the job you were hired to do. You are being paid well. The ninety/two-forty quadrant is to be eliminated by an outside force and you have agreed to carry out the job. Do you have any reticence about this now? Have you grown afraid?”

“Don’t overstep your place,” the Queen snapped. “You’re in no position to defy me.”

“Spare me. I will expect you to carry out the mission as we agreed, and do it well. Naught is to be left.”

She nodded condescendingly. “Worry not, Viceroy. We, unlike your type, can execute missions without the risk of failure. After that, who knows? We might just decide to eliminate you and your vile race from the Dark Ring as well.”

“And who would support you? You need us just as much as we need you. Alone you would fall under the Galaxy Alliance.”

“But with you around, it’s just a matter of time before you decide to conquer and convert us into a Province,” she stated acidly.

“Mayhap, but that is not something that should worry you right now. Moreover, there are planets to be reaped... For instance, Arus is a good example. Fare thee well, Milady.” The hybrid bowed and left.

“Impertinent creature...” The Queen hissed under her breath. “I’m going to kill you.”

The Capture

Lotor felt something brush against his arm gently and his lips curved into a slight smile. He shifted in his sleep and continued indulging in his fantasy. Naturally, in his state, he didn’t realise he was dreaming. In his mind he was with his Princess, or rather, she was with him in his oversized waterbed.

He let out a slight moan of pleasure as his imagination began to unfold more of Allura. Unfurl more of that forbidden fruit that he was always denied. He had already undone the zipper on her uniform. He could see a small sliver of white skin being revealed; this being his reverie, she wore nothing under the pink uniform.

About to touch his lips to that revelation, he was suddenly jostled out of bed in a most uncouth fashion.

He fell ungracefully onto his rear and looked up, ready to convey severe physical violence and, most likely, death to whoever had disturbed him thus. Instead, he met with several blasters aimed at his head. The men holding the guns were tall, strong, wearing black armour and stared down at him with cold and detached looks.

"Who are you?" Lotor demanded, as he stood up warily.

"The question is," one of the men corrected, obviously the leader judging by the intricate armour he wore, "have you any rank of importance for me to consider sparing your miserable life?"

Lotor emitted a throaty growl, displaying his affront at being thus addressed. "I am Crown Prince Lotor D'ssat of Doom!" he snarled and squared his shoulders. "Now submit and I'll consider making your death swift."

Lotor knew he had made a mistake just by looking at the commander. The latter looked amused and regarded Lotor appraisingly, like an object. The Prince of Doom realised something was very amiss. He recognised them as the Brethan, but this did not explain what they were doing in his private chambers. He felt somewhat vulnerable wearing only a tight white tank top and black breeches; his pyjamas.

"What do you want?" Lotor asked circumspectly.

"You have been chosen to serve Queen Soxdavalite," the man responded. "I suggest you surrender now and your trip will be much easier." He paused and gave him a strange look. "And much less painful," he added.

"Who are you?" Lotor queried again, trying to gain time to assess his predicament.

The man looked amused by Lotor. "I am General Formalhaut. I serve Queen Soxdavalite of Brethan."

Lotor was still bewildered. This still did not explain what they were doing in his bedroom. "How did you get in here?" *And why is Brethan, our neighbouring planet, attacking us? Has the Drule finally decided that we're no longer needed? Lotor's mind spun. But why would Brethan help them? They have always held out against the Empire.*

Formalhaut looked patiently at him. "The Queen wishes for your services. She dispatched us to come here and get you." He narrowed his eyes. "It was a hard fight, but we finally found you. Now move!"

Lotor took his cue. With the grace of a feline, he first dropped to his knees and sent his fists flying into the abdomen of two of the guards. He managed to wind them and, he believed, break his own knuckles on the heavy armour they wore. Leaping up, he landed a kick on another, spun and kicked a fourth. He had the satisfaction of hearing them falling, but his feet ached from the impact.

Feigning his next move, he dropped only to jump up, spin half way through his leap and, using the momentum, kicked out hard at a soldier's head. The man crumpled under the assault, collapsing heavily to the floor unconscious. As Lotor landed, however, he was pistol whipped from behind and stumbled forward with a grunt.

Ignoring the pain, he darted out of the room. He scowled at the butchery that met his gaze as he ran along. All the Doomite soldiers and the robot guards were killed or destroyed. Nothing stood. Blood stained the stone floor and walls and he leapt over cadavers and body parts. However, Lotor was seasoned and hardened; this slaughter was nothing new to him. What disturbed him was not so much the fact that it had happened in his own abode, but that he had slept through it. His senses were honed to be almost beyond preternatural and he was never taken by surprise. Especially by something happening so close to him.

Too much wine and wenching... he thought, scolding himself. *And of course dreams about the Kitten. I must be getting old.*

The Castle of Doom was built following Rome's principal; every hallway led to the throne room. Lotor tried to stop as he entered the grand sandtum, but skidded in a pool of blood and fell heavily on his shoulder. He groaned and got up.

"Father! What's...?"

He stopped abruptly, registering what was upon the throne. The mass of severed limbs and dangling viscera looked nothing like Zarkon once had. The only thing that made him recognise the maimed visage as his father was the head. It was lying by the foot of the throne, the eyes wide open in shock. Lotor's face mirrored the expression.

He lost control of his senses momentarily. He had never thought that seeing his father dead would affect him, but he discovered that assumption to be very erroneous.

Zarkon, for all the crimes he had committed against Lotor, was still his parent. Lotor had witnessed his mother's and siblings' death. Still, Providence seemed to want him to be the unwilling spectator for an unwelcome sight once more. He was now alone; all who had once shared his blood lay destroyed.

Scowling, he looked at his wrists. *The vanbraces!* He looked startled at his arm. *They have not... But why? Why are they still here when my father is dead? And the witch... She's also gone.* He noted her crumpled form lying not too far from his father's cadaver. He returned his attention to his arms. The burden he had carried since he was younger was still an integral part of him. *I don't understand how this is possible! The spell should have been broken upon your death!* He raised his head to look at his father. *Are you really dead, you old bat? Or are you just making me believe that I have found peace?*

His pointed ears registered noise behind him. He turned to face the armoured men who had caused so much havoc in his castle and life. He scanned his surroundings briefly and cursed, as he saw no weapons lying around. He braced himself for the fight. He would not be taken captive; at least not for as long as he could draw a breath.

He cast a look at the bracers. *So even in death you would not break the spell,* Lotor thought tightly. *Will I be tormented by you for the rest of my life? Am I not to be granted peace even at the hour of your death?* He locked his jaw. *And why do I feel so hollow?*

More armoured men poured out from the other hallways and he retreated until he was standing in the centre of the room. He measured his opponents and acknowledged that what the next course of action was suicidal; however, he had ceased to care. He would not be taken to any Queen to serve, most likely as a slave, and be forced to submit himself. He suddenly snorted. With his father's death, he had become King Lotor D'ssat of Doom; he would die defending his throne as his father had.

With a spin, he began his attacks. He was satisfied to see at least some of the soldiers fall before his maniacal manoeuvres. Mainly he used his legs to assault them, both because of the momentum he could employ and his hands were softer than his feet. He did not, however, hesitate to use his fists to connect with any part of exposed body. When this occurred, his strength was enough to at least knock a soldier down for a while.

Using all the training he had received at the Drule Academy, he changed tactics. He launched himself up, flipped over his opponents' heads and landed quietly on his feet. The soldiers, who had been advancing on him at a fast rate, crashed into one another as their target suddenly vanished from their midst and were unable to stop in time. Lotor continued his arabesques, turning and twisting his body to evade blows and dodge tackles.

However, their numbers were greater and he was soon overwhelmed. Still he struggled and squirmed, trying to break free. If he could reach a ship, he would leave Doom and return once he had mustered a force to go back with him to reclaim his throne and avenge what had been done.

"Bind him!" General Formalhaut commanded his minions. "I don't care what you do, only don't kill him."

Lotor began a valiant struggle against his attackers. Even when they bound his arms to his back and wrapped him with barbed cords, he still fought to break free. The barbs were meant to keep him still and the more he lashed about, the deeper they dug into his exposed flesh. His clothing, of light cotton, offered no protection against the sharp battering.

"Release me!" he yelled in a rage.

Formalhaut regarded him briefly. "Stun him."

Lotor almost fell as the first shot hit him on the small of his back. The pain made him see pinwheels, but he shook his head against the effects and staggered, still trying to break free. Formalhaut narrowed his eyes and ordered him to be stunned again. This time Lotor collapsed to his knees, but refused to surrender to the effects. Two more hits were necessary before the King of Doom was finally unconscious on the floor.

Formalhaut looked at his officer. "Contact Fleet Eleven. See what their progress is. I want to give this troublemaker to the Queen as soon as possible. He's quite unpredictable and strong," he added in a respectful tone: the respect a warrior gives another when his worth is proven.

The officer gave him a curt bow and left to follow his orders.

Finding a communication console, Formalhaut entered a code and bowed low. "My Queen, the mission has met with outmost success. The Crown Prince is to be brought before you."

The black haired woman inclined her head in acknowledgement. “Good. Bring him to Arus.”

Formalhaut scowled. “Your Majes ty?”

“We will succeed where others have failed. If we secure more forces, we can move against the Drule and regain control over The Dark Ring.” She looked disgusted. “Or rather, Khaintstein, as it is the proper name. Formalhaut, meet the fleet as soon as you can.”

He bowed low again. “As you wish, My Queen.”

“Koran!”

The Prime Minister looked up from the control centre as Keith rushed into the room. The proximity sirens in the castle were blaring and alarm lights flashed red at even intervals. Keith stopped by the screen and studied it momentarily.

“They are not Doomites.” Koran scowled. “The ships are...”

He was interrupted by the first battery of missiles hitting the castle. Keith held on to a bar before he was knocked off his feet and began to enter the commands for the castle’s bastion-cansons to reciprocate the fire.

Lance stumbled into the room, looking upset at having been rudely disturbed from slumber. “What the...?” He cursed and fell as another spate of missiles targeted the castle.

Keith locked his jaw and increased the firing frequency on the canons as Koran began to set the commands to deploy the Lions. Hunk and Allura ran into the room, holding on to the walls for support as more damage befell the construction. Lance got up and sighed loudly.

“I think it’s time for... Urgh!” He was unceremoniously knocked down again. “This is getting repetitive.” He smacked his lips, not amused.

Pidge finally arrived, nimbly hopping over Lance, and joining Koran and Keith at the control console.

“That one ship is coming right at us!” Pidge’s eyes opened wide. “It’s left the rest of the fleet... it’s a kamikaze.”

“I know that,” Keith retorted impatiently. “I’m trying to destroy it before it reaches us.”

Hunk, aiding Allura, finally managed to reach the controls. “That baby is not going to fall under the blasts from the canons.” He studied the screen for a few moments. “She’s well built and judging by their firepower, phenomenally equipped. This is no Doom attack.”

“Who then? The Drule?” Allura steadied herself on a chair. “They’ve never moved against us in the past. They seem to be too busy with Galaxy Garrison.”

Hunk shook his head. “This is not the Drule. Their shape and colouring are wrong.”

“Zarkon probably hired new henchmen to do his dirty work. He probably got tired of Lotor’s perpetual failures,” Lance speculated from the floor, having given up on trying to get up.

“The launch bays are ready,” Koran announced. “Go to the Lions.”

“Time is a factor here and we don’t have it,” Pidge remarked, making quick calculations. “It takes us six minutes to reach the Lions. That ship is going to hit the castle in less than five. If we are still in the tunnels and lose power, we’re going to be trapped.”

“Oh joy,” Lance stated flatly.

“Lock down the canons,” Keith ordered. “Cam’on, team, let’s get out of here and go to the lower levels. That ship is going to hit us.”

By the time they reached the safety of the underground shelter, where the rest of the castle’s inhabitants were already gathered, the alien craft crashed into the castle. The tremor sent everyone to the floor. The very foundations of the magnificent construction seemed to be undermined by the cataclysmic impact of the grand battleship into its parapets and top floors.

“If the castle collapses, we’ll be trapped in here,” Pidge whispered.

Keith nodded resignedly. “I know... Cam’on, we gotta move out and start the counter attack. We’ll go to the Lions the long way.”

The five pilots skulked out of the shelter and were surprised to see that the lower floors of the castle had not been affected by the crash, though the integrity of the building was affected. Faintly, they could hear the sound of creaking and breaking as the upper floors collapsed under the weight of the ship.

“Okay, we’ll go as far as we can and then split up.” Keith paused. “Keep your wrist communicators on. If there’s any trouble...”

The noise of laser blasters interrupted him. They ran towards the source and saw the Arusian guards trying to hold back the onslaught of dark-haired men de-boarding the alien ships and trying to gain entry into the castle. As one, the five pilots rushed to their side and began to fire at the incoming soldiers.

"They don't fall easily," Lance commented, increasing the stun setting on his gun.

Pidge looked thoughtful. "Those men... They are a race from the Dark Ring... Brethan I believe they are called."

"Then they are definitely related to ol' fish face," Hunk concluded.

"Why else would they be here now?" Pidge ducked as a laser came particularly close to their barricade. "From what I've heard, the Brethan are not easy to kill. They are strong; apparently bred to be warriors."

"That certainly explain why their ships held out against the canons for so long," Keith ground out. "And why they are not being affected by the e stun blasts."

The impasse became worse when more Brethan soldiers joined the already bloated flanks, and the Arusian guards and Voltron pilots became harder pressed. Although they fought valiantly, the guards began to fall under the barrage of laser fire. The Brethan soldiers finally gained access to the castle.

They studied the Voltron pilots briefly and changed tactics. Slowly, they began to form a circle around them, cutting off any avenue of escape. Allura suddenly gasped as the charge on her gun exhausted, and she exchanged a glance with Lance, who found himself in the same predicament.

"I would recommend you desist," a soft but powerful voice commanded. "Where is the Princess of this planet?"

Allura raised her chin regally. "I am Princess Allura Amselle."

The black-haired woman studied her speculatively. "Bind her," she ordered. "And the others as well. I am assuming these children are the fabled Voltron pilots." Without another word, she swooped deeper into the castle.

"Keith?" Lance looked like he was ready to carry the fight to the end.

Resignedly, Keith shook his head, glancing briefly at Allura. He would not permit any harm to befall the woman he had grown to love. Undoubtedly, this situation was one of the worse he had faced since he had reached Arus; however, looking at his team mates, he knew there would be a way to escape.

If there isn't, I'll make one, he thought resolutely.

Although the slaughter on Arus had not been as critical as in Doom, the number of the living occupants took a significant decline. The Voltron pilots were bound securely and presented before the Queen of Brethan. They still harboured the belief that this was an attack in collaboration with Zarkon and although they found strange that Lotor had not been leading the attack – or at least shown up to gloat as was his wont – they still did not discard the idea that Doom had simply changed strategies.

In fact, they didn't amend their beliefs until they saw Lotor being half carried, half dragged into the grand hall before Queen Soxdavalite. The Prince of Doom was still clad in his pyjamas, except this garb was mostly torn and his arms and torso bled from several wounds caused by the barbs of the cord constraining him. His skin was bruised and his hands swollen. Still, he somehow managed to stand up erect before the Queen and looked at her defiantly.

She regarded him appreciatively. "Well, it seems that I made a wise choice. You will prove a worthy addition to my harem and a strong slave to keep."

This very statement almost caused Lotor to fall to his knees. He blinked slowly, seeking to orient himself, trying to clear his head from all the stun shots he had received.

"Kneel before the Queen," Formalhaut growled next to him.

"Piss off!" Lotor snapped back.

The General nodded and one of the guards securing Lotor kicked him hard on the back. Lotor turned his head, his eyes reflecting all his anger, and with a swift motion, he kicked back at the guard. Lotor felt the pain reverberate up his body as he connected with the armoured leg of the man. He clenched his teeth against the sting and took great satisfaction in seeing him collapse with a cry. Then, with a groan, Lotor fell to his knees as another soldier punched him in the small of the back. He snarled away the ache and was about to struggle to

his feet when Formalhaut's booted foot kicked him hard in the chest, sending him flying onto the floor.

To Formalhaut's surprise, Lotor managed to put his feet under body and flip himself up again. Lotor studied his adversaries briefly and charged. He barrelled into the closest guard, sending them both flying into two more, standing behind the first. Lotor's fall, however, was not without cost. With his arms bound as they were, the impact dislocated his shoulder, and he howled in pain. His eyes became dusted by red as the pain travelled through his powerful shoulders.

"Not good enough!" Formalhaut snapped and swung his sword, gashing Lotor's chest deeply.

Lotor fell to the floor with another cry, followed by a roar of agony as the impact put his shoulder back in place. He shut his eyes, trying to suppress the throbbing throughout his body. When he finally opened them, he saw the Voltron pilots lined up, awaiting their judgement. Focussing more intently, he saw Allura. He almost forgot where he was, and his own identity for that matter.

Rough hands brought him back. He was hurled painfully to his knees to face the Queen. Although Soxdavalite was a beautiful woman, Lotor could barely register this through the rage he was feeling. He shook his head again, trying to rid himself of the pain. He only succeeded in making himself dizzy, since he was still under the effects of the stun blasts.

"You'll have to kill me before I serve you," Lotor snarled.

The Queen smiled sultrily. "Hum... You're defiant and have a definite spark. I like that in a man. You will serve me very well, Prince Lotor of Doom."

Lotor locked his jaw and made his final decision. With a guttural yell, he unfolded his legs from under himself. This motion caused him to conclude in a standing position, and was consequently able to kick at his guards again. This time, however, he ducked, as Formalhaut was about to strike him and hurled himself at the General, who fell back under the force of the impact. Lotor skidded, trying to regain his balance and kicked his next attacker. His arms and body were afire from the barbs ripping his skin, but he simply bellowed out his pain and anger, lashing at whoever got close enough for him to strike.

"Stun him," Soxdavalite commanded.

The first shot almost knocked Lotor over. The adrenaline pumping through his veins and his own stubbornness were the only things keeping him up. He turned towards his new attacker and began to half stumble towards him, still kicking anyone who tried to stop him.

Soxdavalite steepled her fingers before herself, studying her new choice of slave with hooded eyes. She would have to break him. Generally, she liked them whole, obeying her out of fear or free will. Lotor, however, would not be prepared to swear allegiance. She smiled lightly. She did like men with spunk.

Lotor fell with a groan as another shot hit him. He blinked slowly, still fighting against the effects of the blast. However, his body had given up. Pain and several stun shots rendered it numb and useless. He realised his mind's struggle was in vain. He managed to focus on Allura one last time, and surrendered to unconsciousness.

Keith and Allura sat quietly watching Lance, Pidge and Hunk as they slept in the corner of the room. Their eyes fluttered behind closed lids, the telltale sign that they were troubled. The Voltron pilots and Lotor had all been placed in the same room while they waited for their execution to be carried out by the Queen.

"I really don't believe they are in coalition with Doom," Allura commented thoughtfully.

Keith studied her. "Well, seeing Lotor being dragged into this mess bound and stunned certainly changes things." He scowled. "I have never heard of these people!" he gritted out, frustrated.

Allura sighed. "No. Me neither, but they are strong and quite capable. We didn't even have enough time to make it to the Lions."

Keith nodded. "And now locked up in this room, it's almost impossible to escape."

"Almost?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing's impossible," Keith stated confidently.

She smiled half-heartedly. "I'm going to over and clean up his wounds. They look painful and they might get infected." She paused. "I'm surprised the blood stopped flowing from his chest. I thought he would have bled to death by now."

Keith glanced over at the floor where Lotor had been tossed in shortly after them. The guards had treated him like a sack of dirt. They had even kicked the unconscious form to get him back for his outburst in front of their Queen. Lotor had let out groans, but had remained quite cataleptic.

“Be careful.”

Allura looked at him, amused. “I don’t think he can do much. If in his rage he wasn’t able to break those cords, I don’t think he’ll be able to do it now.”

Keith nodded at the logic. He had seen the Prince in a fury before, and not much was able to contain him. He knew Allura was right. The Princess ripped a piece of her dress and dipped it in the water they had been given by the guards. Gently, she started cleaning up Lotor’s wounds, wiping away the blood caked on his skin.

Lotor regained consciousness lying on his side. His arms were still bound behind him, but the barbed cords had been removed. He groaned feebly, everything causing him pain. He wanted to know where he was, but then he thought, in his agonising delirium, that sleep was better. If he slept, everything could be forgotten and thus, everything would turn out alright. He sighed and decided to do just that, when agony brought him back.

Rolling to his back, disregarding the aching discomfort that his bound wrists brought him, Lotor met the face of his new attacker. To his surprise, it was Allura, looking just as startled at his reaction and holding a torn, stained, damp piece of cloth in her hands. He let out another sigh.

“Where am I?” he murmured, his throat dry, making communication difficult.

“On Arus. We’re being kept as prisoners in one of the spare rooms,” she explained. “I’m just trying to clean up your wounds.” She gingerly touched the cloth to his skin again. “I’m sorry if it hurts, but it’s better if it’s washed.”

He flinched as the damp cloth made the pain flare up in his wounds.

She studied him briefly. “Who are these people?”

Lotor shook his head. “The Brethan... They are a neighbouring planet. They have destroyed Doom. Everyone is dead. I don’t understand what has prompted the attack. Brethan, Furie and Doom have always lived in relative peace. We have always been besieged by the Drule... I cannot fathom why they would have attacked us.”

“Everyone... is dead?” Allura creased her brow as she wiped his skin.

He looked pensive, as if something was bothering him, but he wasn’t able to unravel what was disturbing him. “Yes, everyone.” He paused. “Do you have water?”

Allura nodded. “We saved some. We figured you would wake up thirsty.” She put the bowl to his lips.

Lotor drank deeply. “Thank you.” His voice became a little stronger and he looked around, finally noticing that the Voltron Force was trapped in the same room with him. He saw Keith seated in the far corner, observing him carefully. Lotor, even as weak as he was feeling, glared at Keith. “What, little man? Are you going to take advantage of the fact that I’m tied up and weak? Now you can finally have a chance to beat me...”

“I’m a better man than you, Lotor. I wouldn’t stoop to your level,” Keith sneered, still sitting.

“We thought the attack was from Doom,” Allura murmured, trying to disperse the hostility.

Lotor shook his head. “All I know is that I woke up with those goons standing over me. I managed to run away, found everyone dead and then I got caught.” Again, he looked disquieted.

Allura continued cleaning his wounds. “Well, it seems that whoever they may be, they are quite strong and they want to destroy the Alliance. Arus is the first to be attacked by them.” Her lips trembled in bitterness. “They are heading towards Pollux.” She paused and took a deep breath. “That Queen has ordered us to be executed.”

At this, Lotor sat up. “I won’t have it!” he assured her angrily, ignoring the pain in his battered body.

“You’re bound and kept in a locked room. What exactly are you planning to do?” Keith asked flatly. “Turn into a superhero and save us?”

Lotor glared at him. “Back off, little man!” he snarled. “I never said anything about saving you. I’m talking about myself and Allura.”

Allura, who had been trying to make him lie down again, crossed her arms and stared at him. “I am not leaving them behind.”

Lotor rolled his eyes. “Grant me strength,” he mumbled under his breath.

"It's just like him to be that way," Keith retorted, caustically. "Selfish evil doers are all the same."

Lotor blinked languidly at Keith. "Do you ever get new material?"

"What do you mean?" Keith asked defensively.

Lotor shook his head. "Fine," he finally snapped. "If you need me to rescue you, then I suppose I can do it too." He smirked. "I'll be your knight in shining armour."

"Lotor..." Keith began, but Allura interrupted.

"Enough!" she reprimanded angrily. "We are all in dire straights and all you two can do is argue like two brats!" She stood up. "The only way we can get out of here is by working together."

Lotor's head suddenly snapped up. "Or not."

"What do you...?"

Before Allura could finish her sentence, the door opened and Lotor threw himself forward, knocking the startled jailer back. Unceremoniously, Lotor clamped down on the man's neck, shaking his head, using his sharp teeth to tear at the man's jugular. Luckily, the man was too surprised to cry out and Lotor managed to end his life quickly. He pulled away and spat out bits of flesh and the blood that had flooded his mouth.

"I hate resorting to this," he complained, wiping his face on the man's shirt, trying to clean himself up. "It's not pleasant at all."

Allura and Keith just gaped at him in disbelief.

"What?!" Lotor demanded getting up. "I got us out, didn't I? Now grab something and cut these ropes off me. It's uncomfortable."

Keith snapped out of the shock of witnessing the feral murder. He went to the guard, found a gun and armed himself. Moving on a little, he found a sharp piece of metal and came back, cutting Lotor's bonds. The Prince of Doom groaned as the blood began to flow through his cramped arms and hands. He moved slowly, trying to return his arms to their natural positions. The shoulder he had dislocated earlier brought him excruciating pain. He stumbled, his gorge rising from absolute physical distress.

Allura moved unconsciously towards him. Lotor held out a hand, impeding her progress while trying to keep his stomach from making an abrupt appearance. Finally, he composed himself.

"Cam'on, we gotta get out of here." Lotor looked at them slowly. He then scanned the hall. "It looks quiet enough."

"Do you have a plan?" Keith questioned, annoyed.

"Yes," Lotor snarled.

"Well, what the hell is it?" Keith clenched his fists exasperated.

Lotor looked flatly at him. "To get out of here! Where's the launch pad? We won't get too far without a ship."

"You mean to just leave the planet?" Allura blinked in shock.

Lotor regarded her briefly. "Unless you have a better solution, I would say so. We're outnumbered, out powered and, in my case, out dressed." He didn't look very happy. "Voltron is obviously out of commission or you wouldn't be in this cell."

Keith sighed, seeing the logic, but helpless to do anything else. "Voltron is fine; we just have to reach the Lions. The only problem is that the Queen is in the Control room with most of the guards."

"Fine," Allura agreed, upset. "We'll try and reach the Lions by the outside. We can then contact Pollux." She turned to Keith. "Romelle will contact the Alliance and we'll get more aid."

"Lovely." Lotor rolled his eyes. "Now let's get moving."

Allura gritted her teeth but refrained from saying anything else.

The Voltron Force and Lotor reached the launch pad without problems. The Castle of Lions looked rather deserted, and Lotor guessed the Brethan were either celebrating or had moved on to conquer something else. Not wanting to take any chances, they decided not to investigate until they acquired more aid from the Alliance and recovered the Lions. At the launch pad, while the Voltron pilots were boarding one ship, Lotor moved to another.

"Where do you think you're going?" Lance inquired.

Lotor rolled his eyes. "Home! Where else?"

"You said Doom was destroyed," Allura countered.

"Well, it's still my home."

“Why don’t you just come to Pollux with us?” Keith tried to reason. “If we’re scattered, we won’t be able to fight them as well.”

“Because I really have no desire to become part of your team,” Lotor replied acidly. “And I have no desire to have you throw me in jail. You go and do whatever it is that heroes do, and I’ll go and do what I have to do.”

“Which would be?” Lance inquired.

“Take a long shower, put on some clothes and drink until I can’t stand any more.”

“You mean you’re just going to let those goons get away with what they did to your planet?” Allura knitted her brows.

“No. I’m going to do something about it, only I’m not going about it the same way you’re going to.” Lotor arched an eyebrow.

“And just when are you going to do whatever it is that you’re going to do?” Lance asked, getting more perplexed with each passing moment.

“All in good time.” Lotor looked indifferently at them. “It was a thrill. Goodbye.” He boarded a ship.

“What an arrogant toad!” Allura’s face contorted in disgust.

Keith shrugged. “What else would you expect from a creep?”

“At least he didn’t demand marriage... He must be upset,” Lance quipped and ran into the ship.

The two ships left the hangar and went their separate ways. However, before they had achieved any considerable distance, they were shot by the castle’s defence guns. The two ships, only transports and unarmed, rapidly began to fall back to Arus.

The Voltron Force did the most sensible thing and abandoned their craft via escape-pods. Lotor, who didn’t even know that the transports were equipped with such facilities, crashed quite severely onto terra firma, still aboard the ship.

Allura got out of her escape-pod and found herself somewhere on Arus. Looking around, she saw none of the others, or their capsules. However, she did see a smoking mess not too far off. With a resigned sigh, she decided to move towards it to find out what it was. The walk was harsh and long; she had landed in the wastelands of Arus where vegetation and animal life were scarce and the sun beat down mercilessly upon her.

Hours later, she reached the fuselage of the ship. She recognised as being the one Lotor had escaped in – or at least had tried to. She was tired, thirsty, foot-sore and hungry. She heaved a deep sigh and decided to enter the remains of the craft, hoping to find at least some food and water. Furthermore, night was beginning to fall, and the ship would provide her with a sheltered place to sleep.

The interior was dark and fuggy. She picked her steps cautiously and reached the main control room of the ship. To her she found Lotor lying on the floor unconscious, his hair stained with blood. What was left of his clothes was so torn as to be considered almost indecent. He had also sustained more cuts and bruises. She wondered if he was even alive.

She moved towards him quickly and was rather surprised to not only find him alive, but with a steady pulse and breathing normally. She stood up and assessed her situation. Dragging him would only further exhaust her, but he didn’t look very uncomfortable where he was. She left him, found food, water and standard emergency clothing in the storage space, before returning to him. After she ate and drank, she took out the first aid kit and began to tend to his wounds. Lotor groaned in his unconsciousness and swatted at her.

“Stay still!” she snapped. “This will make you feel better later.”

Lotor, however, did not comply. Allura thought of tying him down, but figured that it was more work than she was willing to undergo. She trapped his arms under her legs instead and continued to tend to him, smacking him once in a while when he thrashed beneath her.

Her job somewhat done – since Lotor was not co-operating – she wrapped herself in blankets and fell asleep not too far from him.

Lotor was dreaming. He was happy in this pseudo reality with Allura in his arms. It was the most realistic fantasy he had ever had, since he could smell her subtle fragrance and even feel her hair against his chest and face. Something kept tugging on him, trying to wake him up. Stubbornly he kept trying to swat it away, but could never quite reach it. He nuzzled the soft locks that were brushing his skin. For a moment, whatever it was that was attempting to wake him gave up. Lotor was ready to succumb completely to the dream when the

annoyance came back, and this time succeeded in waking him up by hitting him with a figurative two by four.

Still he protested and refused to open his eyes. He tried to fall back asleep and return to the pleasant land of illusions. Then he knitted his brow puzzled. Someone was in his arms. Someone slight, with long hair, who smelt just like Allura had in his dream. He replayed the events of the previous night – or whenever it was that he had fallen asleep. The ship had crashed. He had been tossed from his chair and hit his head—hard.

Then why is there a woman in my arms? he thought, quizzically.

Opening his eyes slowly, he saw that whoever it was, had light coloured hair and seemed to fit Allura's description very well.

Okay, I'm still dreaming. He smiled at the thought. *May as well continue where I left it off.* He closed his eyes again and began to run his hands over the body before him.

Before he could begin to fully explore the uncharted territory, however, Allura woke up. She had also been dreaming; she had finally married Keith and they were in their nuptial bed for the first time. She opened her eyes, saw blue skin instead of white and shrieked. Lotor cringed at the sound and rolled away startled.

"Ooh... my poor head," he mourned.

"YOU PERVERT!" she screamed at him.

"Whatever. Just keep the decibels at a reasonable level," Lotor complained, holding his head.

Allura looked angrily at him. "How dare you try to take advantage of me?"

"I found you in my arms." He looked irritated. "What the hell were you doing there?"

"I was not in your arms! At least not until you decided to place me there!"

"Oh give it up, Allura," Lotor retorted, taking inventory of the situation. "Hold a minute..." He scowled. "What are you doing here anyway? You left with the stooges. What are you doing in my ship?"

"We got hit and we left our ship in escape pods. I landed not too far away and came here. I thought you had abandoned ship, but I found you half-dead instead." She put her hands on her hips. "You're welcome, by the way. It was a pleasure putting iodine on your cuts!" she leered sarcastically.

"I'm sure you enjoyed it to no end!" he snapped back.

"What? Me?" Allura looked innocent. "Hurt anyone for pleasure? Do I look like a certain blue-skinned Prince?"

"Oh give it a rest." Lotor began to look around and found the clothes she had left lying on a chair. "Finally," he mumbled and looked back at her. "Turn around."

"Like I would ever turn my back on you!" she retorted acidly.

Lotor looked amused. "Don't say I didn't warn you." And he began to take off the rags his clothes had become.

Allura let out a startled gasp, went a bright crimson, and turned her back to him quickly.

"What is it? Is it the fact that you have never seen a man naked before or is it that you never seen a *real* man naked?" he taunted.

"You're disgusting!" she cried, upset.

"I've been told." He shrugged off the comment.

Lotor looked at himself when he was done dressing. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, but the material of the pants was alien to him, and he frowned at it. He studied Allura's back but refrained from asking her anything. At that moment, he didn't want to be even around her. Lotor scowled.

What's the matter with me?! It's Allura who's here. Alone with me and I don't want to be around her? I must have hit my head quite hard on that fall...

"I'm ready, let's go," he announced.

Allura turned around guardedly and relaxed when she saw that he was dressed. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know. It's your planet. We have to find transportation and I'm assuming the castle is the only place with such a commodity." He paused. "So I guess we're going back to the castle."

"Lotor, we are probably on the other side of the planet."

The Prince just blinked at her.

She sighed. "Look, it's going to be a long way there. We are going to have to take whatever supplies we need. Maybe we'll find help along the way."

Lotor sat down and buried his face in his hands. “Oh do tell me, this is a nightmare. I’m gonna wake up on my comfortable bed in my dark, warm room and no one will be dead and I won’t have to walk.”

Allura scowled and studied his form briefly. “Lotor, what’s wrong with you? You are acting completely out of character.”

He looked up at her. “I have just lost everything I ever had. My father is dead, everyone I knew is dead, my castle is probably demolished by now and I’m stuck on this God forsaken planet! Does any of this explain why I might be acting out of character?”

“You don’t have to be rude about it,” she scolded, annoyed again. “Well, it’s really up to you. I’m going to get moving. If you decide to come, you can. Otherwise you can just sit here and wallow in your misery alone.”

He stood up. “For someone who’s supposed to be good, you’re rather cruel,” he remarked acidly.

“Well, look at who I’m dealing with.”

“You’re just so full of wit today, your highness,” he sneered.

She bowed mockingly. “I’m glad it’s been amusing for you.” She walked out.

“Grant me strength.” Lotor rolled his eyes and followed her.

Contrary to what Allura had believed, Lotor proved to be quite resourceful. She had assumed that he would know nothing about survival but she found herself learning quite a bit from him, although she never admitted to it. When she did subtly ask him where he had learned so much – being the spoiled Prince brat of Doom and all – he told her that the Drule Academy had been responsible for everything he knew. The Academy had offered him all the training necessary to survive any confrontation and situation.

They left the ship about two hours later, after Lotor had packed makeshift supplies and managed to strip the shuttle of anything he deemed important to their trip. Allura did not question some of his items, but she honestly wondered what they were for. She figured he had suffered a head injury in the past few days and had gone crazy.

The terrain only got worse as they progressed. Lotor scanned his surroundings constantly, trying to orient himself. Though he tried to keep a steady pace, he was slowed because his body was still healing, as well as the fact that his pack was a lot bigger and heavier than Allura’s. He watched Allura ahead of him, stumbling on the loose rocks and tripping over the scarce shrubs that grew in the wasteland.

He shook his head. *Women! Humph, he snorted. If she thinks she’ll break my heart by acting like a klutz, she’s quite out of her mind. I’m not carrying her load.*

Allura sighed when she slipped on the loose rocks again. Unlike Lotor, she had not found stout boots and comfortable clothing. She was still in her dress and soft slippers. Her feet were screaming in agony, since she could feel every rock through her shoes. The dress was cumbersome and not meant to be worn for a trek across desert land where nothing else besides wind, dust and rocks resided. Still, she would not allow Lotor to witness her discomfort. She actually admired his strength and tried to reflect it with her own actions. She doubted she had ever met, or ever would meet again, someone like him. He had been beaten senseless, stunned several times, crash landed and was still standing and looking rather healthy. Aside from the cuts and bruises, which to her surprised were healing at a tremendous rate.

You’re either extremely strong, or you pride is too big to admit defeat... Hum... Allura cringed as she stepped on a sharp rock. Nanny always did warn me about male ego. She also said men are dumb... She smiled, highly amused. That could explain why you kept on fighting when you didn’t stand a chance.

To his astonishment, Lotor found that the walk was truly proving beneficial for him. He set his mind into “alert mode” and began to replay the current events, trying to sort through his feelings. His father was dead. He honestly wanted to be cheerful about the event, but found that he couldn’t. The carnage he had witnessed in his last moments in the castle was painful for him.

He scowled. When did he care? Doom had always been just a place where he could crash after long nights of parties and long days of carrying out his duties. The only thing he had ever liked about it was the fact that he was the Crown Prince and thus possessed all the luxury that title endowed. He had never been happy there, he had never known love. Not that

he could even remember what that felt like any more. It had been so long since his mother and siblings had died that he couldn't recall the feeling of being loved.

He regarded Allura before him. He loved her with all his strength and soul. But he knew that she didn't reciprocate that feeling. She despised him for what he was and did. It was no secret to him that she had deep feelings for the Captain of the Voltron Force.

I've had it he thought, suddenly irritated. *I don't care any more. I'm going to get off this rock, and I'm going back to Doom, fumigate it and then I'm going to turn that bloody place into some sort of Club Med and I'll be happy drinking and wenching until I die of an overdose.* He scowled and nodded. *Yeah... That's a good resolution. Allura can be happy with that freak and I'll just be on my own...* He looked alarmed and chided his thoughts. *Don't think it!* He readjusted the pack on his back, but the thought crept into his head nevertheless. *...And feel sorry for yourself...*

"Oh, for crying out!" he exclaimed.

Allura turned around, startled. "What is it?"

Lotor, in turn, jumped at the sound of her voice. "Eh?"

"For crying out loud, what?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I was just thinking about something else." He waved a dismissing hand. "It had nothing to do with this."

Allura nodded and continued walking.

I had to think that, didn't I? he scolded himself. *I had to think of how pitiful I am and all that jazz.* He took a deep breath. *I am pathetic.*

And on they walked, being scorched by the sun and, in Allura's case, managing the terrain. She lost complete concept of time, distance and direction. The ship was now lost to view and she focused on the ground ahead of her, prompting her feet to take one more step so that she could still move.

"We should rest here," Lotor finally announced.

Allura nodded and fell to her knees in exhaustion and pain. Lotor - so much for his earlier thoughts about giving up on her - rushed over, took off her pack and sat her gently on the ground. He handed her some water and she drank thirstily. He then took the time to really study her and realised that she was not going to make it very far as she was dressed.

"Look, just be compliant for a couple of minutes here, okay? It's for your own benefit." He stood up and went to his own pack.

Allura wanted to dismiss him, but found that she didn't have the strength or will. She sat quite dejectedly and simply watched him. He returned a few moments later and knelt behind her. She stiffened when she felt his touch, but realised what he was doing. Soon, the feather-light brushing had her hair up in a ponytail and out of her face and back. She felt much cooler and turned slightly to face him.

"Thank you." She was honestly surprised at how gentle he had been.

He shrugged. "I'll see if I can make something a little easier for you to move in." He went back to his pack.

As he walked away, Allura focused on his hands. They were large, strong and seemed incapable of being as delicate and gentle as they had just been. She then appraised Lotor himself. He was certainly striking and handsome, even as casually dressed as he was. She thought he was the type man who could look good just wearing a burlap bag. She looked away quickly as he turned towards her again.

"Listen, I'm not trying to be a pervert, as you would put it, okay?" He knelt in front of her. "This will facilitate your walking and you won't trip as much."

She glared at him, ready to protest, but stopped when he rolled his eyes. She realised that he had seen her struggles and he seemed to be merely trying to help her. She took a deep breath.

"Okay," she finally said. "Thank you."

Lotor nodded and grabbed the hem of her dress, ripping it upwards. Allura let out a startled squeal and slapped his hands.

"Chill out, woman." Lotor sat back on his heels. "I'm not doing anything lecherous to you here."

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I'm turning your dress into pants," he explained. "It would be easier if it was off, but knowing that you're not going to take it off with me around, I have to do it while you're wearing it. Trust me, I'm only going to go so far up." He smirked.

Allura growled something incoherent and allowed him to finish his tailoring. To her surprise, he kept true to his word and ripped the dress only as far as her mid thigh. Taking the two halves, he wrapped a part over each of her legs then tied it up with a thin cord so that they wouldn't come loose, but would be easy for her to remove if she needed to.

Nice... Those legs are far more... enthralling than I had ever imagined, Lotor thought distractedly.

Before she could say or do anything, he pulled off her shoes and hissed as he saw her feet. He looked flatly at her.

"You know, there's nothing wrong in stating that you're hurt." His shrugged unambiguously.

She looked at him regally. "This coming from you... Mister I'm tied up, stunned, but I'm still going to fight every armoured goon that I see."

He shrugged. "It's different. I'm a man."

Allura couldn't help herself, and slapped Lotor hard across the face. The latter had not been expecting this reaction and fell to his rump from his crouch in front of her. He stared at her, stunned, his face turning red in the shape of her hand. Allura looked surprised.

"I-I'm sorry, I..." She shook her head.

Lotor returned to his crouch and narrowed his eyes. "I have always believed that if you're strong enough to give, you're strong enough to receive," he explained. "If you think you're so tough and strong, repeat the action and we'll put it to the test. If you survive my slap, then I will bow to you and allow you to do whatever it is that you want to do to me." He took one of her feet.

Allura swallowed and looked at her foot in his hands. It almost disappeared. She allowed her eyes to travel from his hand and up the length of his arm to his shoulder. Lotor had a dominant build. His muscles were well pronounced and the fact that he was half Doomite only added to his strength. She had no doubt that she would probably not survive a slap from him - if he really put an effort into it, he could probably decapitate her. He could probably decapitate her.

Yet, all that strength was currently being channelled into tenderness and her foot began to feel much better under his ministrations. He applied salves and massaged them into the skin gently, making her feel almost light headed with pleasure.

"Did you learn that at the Academy too?" she asked sheepishly.

"Yes." He continued to massage her gently, enjoying the feel of her soft skin.

She nodded and cringed slightly as he hit a particular sore spot. He seemed to realise that, given his scowl, and began to work the knots away. Finally, after a few moments, he placed her foot down and looked up at her.

"I cannot offer you much in terms of footwear. However, if you put socks on, it should help a bit." He regarded her pack. "And I'll lighten your load, so it won't be as stressful on you."

"It's okay." She shook her head. "I'll be fine."

"If you can't walk tomorrow, being obstinate now will not do you any good. I commend you for your stubbornness, but just be more compliant right now." He began to place some of the items from her pack into his.

"What about you, your highness?" she asked sarcastically. "I don't believe that you're used to this kind of thing either, regardless of the training you've had."

He stood up and walked away from her smirking. "It's different. I'm a man." He turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "No slaps this time?"

She gritted her teeth. "You're a jerk!" she screamed at him. "A certified..." she bit off the rest of the sentence.

He moved closer to her. "Say it."

"Go away, Lotor." She stood up, wincing lightly. Her tender feet were not quite ready to be used yet. "Why are you being so mean to me? It's not my fault you're here!"

He sighed. "Fine. I'm sorry." He picked up his pack, which was a little heavier. "Let's get moving."

Their progress was slow, the two being scorched by the merciless sun. Allura felt faint and Lotor began to hallucinate. Eventually they both collapsed and remained still. Allura didn't regain awareness until nightfall. She woke up shivering and looked at Lotor who had curled into a ball with his pack.

"Lotor?" She shook him. "Wake up."

He looked dazed at her and gazed at what he had been hugging. He let out a groan. Even oversized packs were enough to set his fertile imagination off on fantasies about Allura.

“What happened?” he asked, wiping his face roughly.

“I think we fainted.” She hugged herself. “Why is it so cold?”

“Deserts... Go figure.” He sat up and felt the chill. He rummaged through his pack and pulled out two blankets. “Can you cook?” He handed her one.

“Yes.”

“Oh, good. I didn’t want to be poisoned today.”

“What?” Allura said sarcastically, feigning surprise. “Prince Lotor can’t cook?”

Lotor rolled his eyes. “Oh, I can cook. The question is: can you eat what I produce?”

Allura grimaced. “That bad?”

“Oh, far worse” Lotor waved a dismissing hand. “I figured I could probably catch something and we could deep fry it or something. I don’t think I can survive on cereal for long.”

“Those are standard rations.” Allura pointed at the items in question. “They contain all the nutrients and vitamins you need.”

“And they taste worse than cardboard and have no sugar!” Lotor shook his head. “So how about it? How does a nice roasted— er — something sound to you?”

“If you can find and catch one, sure.” She crossed her arms. “I’ll light a fire.”

Lotor got up and dropped the blanket, which was quickly usurped by Allura. He checked the charge on the gun he had found on the ship and moved off into the night.

“Where have you been?” Allura asked when Lotor finally returned.

“Ahm...” He looked around. “I found us food...”

“But?” she prompted, seeing that he had nothing on his hands.

“But it kind of got stuck in the tree back there. So maybe we can move closer to it.” He kicked the ground awkwardly.

“Kind of got stuck in a tree?” Allura queried, confused.

“Yeah...” Lotor fidgeted rather sheepish. “It was running, then it wasn’t, and then I killed it. But I can’t move it, so I left it there but we have to go there and eat it there, and —” He hung his head in defeat.

Allura was growing increasingly curious over whatever it was that Lotor had found and killed. She stood up, and still wrapped in her blankets, shouldered her pack. “If you put out the fire, we’ll go.”

Lotor kicked sand and dirt over it and led her a little ways off towards a grove of gnarled trees. Allura startled visibly when she saw the creature that Lotor had managed to find them for dinner.

“However did you do that?” she gasped in awe.

Lotor shrugged. “It was quite accidental, really. I stood up on a rock to get a better view, only it started moving and turned out I was on that thing’s back.” He paused. “So I did the wisest thing...”

Allura crossed her arms, waiting for him to start boasting.

Lotor shrugged. “I ran like the dickens after my gun proved quite useless against it and it eventually trapped itself there. Then it was an easy shot, except, of course, I can’t move it.” He crossed his arms. “You never mentioned that you have dinosaurs on Arus.”

Allura laughed. “Actually, that’s just a lizard. They don’t usually grow so big, but I guess you had to find the biggest one to have ever lived!” she teased.

Lotor regarded the lizard briefly. “I still say it’s a dinosaur.” He shook his head. “Oh well. Grub’s up.” He moved towards it to carve it.

Allura awoke to find herself in Lotor’s arms again. This time she realised that she had been the one to move, since she was in his bedroll and not the other way around. She took a deep breath and moved as gently as she could. She did not want to face Lotor’s smirking again. She knew she would be getting enough of it throughout the day.

Lotor woke shortly after with a lazy stretch and blinked at his surroundings. Finally remembering where he was, he got up and went about his own things, seeming to not have noticed the Princess’ presence.

“Ready?”

Allura startled. She had ignored Lotor since he had not even given her a simple ‘good morning’ and his strong voice in the quiet desert was certainly louder and deeper than she remembered.

“Oh, you finally deemed me worthy of your company?” She arched an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry. I’m not a morning person.” He shook his hair out, trying to keep it off his face.

“Here.” Allura went to him and tied it up on a ponytail. “Better?”

“Much. Thank you.”

“Why didn’t you just do it yourself? You obviously know how.”

“Because I wanted you to do it...” He smirked. “And it worked.”

Allura rolled her eyes. “You’re such a...”

Lotor’s eyebrows shot up. “What? Say it.”

“I won’t give you the satisfaction.” She turned and began to walk on.

Lotor laughed and followed her.

“Freeze!”

Lotor and Allura spun to face the voice. Allura sighed in relief and ran towards Lance, who took her in one arm and held her protectively from Lotor, who just rolled his eyes.

“Oh, do give it a rest,” Lotor groaned.

“What have you done, Lotor?” Lance demanded.

Lotor looked flatly at him. “Let’s see, I’ve walked for the past two days on this God forsaken desert, I killed a dinosaur, I patched up her clothes, and I think that is the total inventory, unless you want me to go back even further, in which case I’ve crashed landed and was abducted. Anything else?”

Lance was about to say something when Allura pulled away.

“Lotor has been rather helpful to me since we started this journey, Lance.”

“Somehow I don’t believe that.” Lance crossed his arms.

“I really couldn’t care less, if you believe me or not,” Lotor snapped and continued walking.

“Lotor!” Allura called and went after him. “Lance, are you coming?”

“What? With him?” Lance asked incredulously.

“Yes!” Allura motioned for him to follow. “Cam’on! Lotor is actually quite resourceful.”

Lotor looked over his shoulder at her. “That’s because I’m a man,” he remarked sagaciously.

“I’ve had it with you and your male chauvinism!” Allura dropped her pack. “Do your worse!” She then punched Lotor hard on the back, just beneath his own pack.

Lotor, who was taken completely by surprise, stumbled and cursed fluently. “My ovaries!” he cried out finally.

Lance scowled. “Ahm, Lotor, you’re a man. You don’t have ovaries.”

“Don’t you oppress me!” Lotor snapped at him, before turning to Allura. “You have just signed your death warrant.”

She raised her chin defiantly. “Go ahead.”

Lotor hesitated long enough to drop his pack. In a fluid motion, he had Allura by the arms, pinned firmly under him on the ground. One of his knees rested on the back of her neck.

“Unhand her!” Lance screamed, pointing the gun at his head.

“Oh, shut up!” Lotor and Allura reprimanded together.

“This is between him and me,” Allura growled and spat out sand. “Well, Lotor, go ahead and punish me if you can.”

“You know that I cannot,” he snarled. “But keep pushing your luck and I may just be able to do it.” He released her with a rough shove.

She got up. “I’ll be waiting.”

“I’m sure it won’t be for long,” he shot back.

“Could you kindly explain what’s going on here?” Lancescratched his head confused.

“Marital spats. We’re practicing.” Lotor smirked and ran when Allura moved to do him violence again. “Is that all you have?” he taunted.

Allura was suddenly energised by anger. The adrenaline rush she got was enough to grant her the necessary speed to catch up to Lotor, whereupon she leapt on him. Lotor, taken by surprise again, fell and she straddled his back, pinning his arms down.

"I guess you're not as grand as you thought," Allura mocked.

"We'll see about that."

With little effort, he freed his arms and rolled so that he ended up on top, only Allura was facing him this time. He looked at her amused, holding her arms high over her head. Allura growled incoherently at him until she realised her predicament. They were in a most compromising position.

"Get off me!" she demanded.

Lotor was about to say something when he also noted their position. "Hum... This is certainly an interesting turn of events."

"You sick pig!" She began to struggle. "Get off me this instant!"

Lotor got up warily and offered her a hand. She slapped it away and stood up on her own.

"Have two finished quarrelling yet?" Lance looked amused.

"Buzz off!" they retorted together again.

Allura sighed. "Look, I'm calling it a truce, okay?"

"Fine." Lotor went to his pack and shouldered it again. "Let's get a move on."

Lance eyed the pair strangely but followed, taking turns in helping Lotor with the pack.

"Have you any idea where the others are?" Allura asked Lance.

He shook his head. "I stayed with the capsule until I finally ran out of food. I figured I would move on and see if I could find some sort of oasis or something." Lance shrugged. "Well, I haven't had any luck."

Allura sighed. "Lance, Lotor plans to reach the castle, hijack another flier and take off. I don't think it's going to work."

"Lotor strikes me as the type who will use brute force until he either gets killed or gets what he wants." Lance paused. "Although I must admit that in this particular instance, he probably has the best plan." He looked far in the distance. "Princess, it's only us against all of them." He looked over at Lotor. "Hey you! Com'ere!"

"What? No please?" Lotor sneered sardonically.

"Listen, we need a plan if we're going to bust back into the castle and we still have to find the others," Lance stated.

"No. You need a plan and you need to find the others. All I have to do is get my sorry hide back to Doom and see what I can salvage from it," Lotor reminded flatly.

"Lotor, won't you ever change?" Allura asked.

Lotor rolled his eyes. "Look, it's not my fault we all got sucked into this maelstrom. I was sleeping when it was all happening, for crying out loud. All I want is to reach home again." He paused. "I'm sorry you're here. I really am. Personally, I would rather be alone."

Allura scowled. "Together we have a better chance."

"No, working together means that I have to think about other people as well as myself. Together means that I cannot carry out things the way I normally would. I was never trained to work in a team," Lotor added the last with spite. "I'm a solitary creature, used to fending for myself." He sighed. "Look, you know what I'm good at. If you can think of anything tell me what to do and it will be done. My plan is to storm the castle, disable the security and steal a flier."

"Commendable," Lance leered ironically. "Storm the castle, did you say? How? You're only one."

Lotor smiled humourlessly. "Oh, I have my ways."

Allura pulled Lotor to the side, away from Lance. "What's wrong with you?"

Lotor scowled. "What do you mean?"

"Since this whole thing started you have been acting strange. I understand that you have lost a lot and that you're not too particular about being stuck here with us, but..." She looked deep into his eyes. "Lotor, you have been treating me like dirt. It's almost as if you're not the same man who came here about a week ago boasting, threatening havoc and demanding me to be your bride."

"I figured you were enjoying the break." Lotor crossed his arms.

Allura looked at him defeated. "Lotor, could you just listen to me for a few moments?" She waited until he nodded. "I don't want to marry you. I don't like what you do, and to tell the truth, I know very little about you. How can you expect me to simply say yes to you? You're very attractive, but I cannot possibly base my decision on that. I also have feelings for Keith." She looked down. "All I ask right now is that we work together for at least a little bit. If you

help us, we can help you. Everyone will benefit. Think about it for a moment. We know the castle and we can help you reach the main control room where you can disable whatever it is that you want and then we can lead you to the hangars. All I ask is that you help us also reach the same end.” She looked up at him. “Is that too much to ask?”

Lotor felt like she had taken whatever was left of his heart and eviscerated it. He looked up at the sky, trying to regain his equilibrium before looking at her again. The emotional pain he was feeling was a palpable ache in his chest.

“As you wish, Princess.” He then turned and walked away.

Allura realised then the impact of her words on Lotor. She ran after him. “Lotor...”

He pulled away from her touch on his arm. “Just leave me, Princess Allura.” He swallowed tightly. “If we keep stopping like this, we will never reach anywhere. I told you, I promise I’ll behave.”

Allura stood still, watching him walk ahead. “I’m so sorry,” she murmured.

“Princess? Is everything okay?” Lance reached her.

“Ahm, yes, Lance. Lotor says he’ll try to behave,” she replied lamely. “We should get moving.”

The trip became even more oppressive than it had been. At least before, Allura had found some solace at night with Lotor being silly and telling jokes to distract her. However, after the brief talk they had had, the Prince had closed himself up completely. He spoke only when necessary and even then he gave curt answers or brief instructions. The few times Allura did meet his eyes, they were troubled and pained. He purposely avoided any situation where they would be left alone and chose to sleep far from her and Lance.

Even Lance, unaware of what had happened, could sense that something had changed Lotor’s disposition towards them, something that also affected Allura. She was not her optimistic self nor was she inclined to much conversation. Her eyes were constantly darting to Lotor with worry.

Lance decided it was time to make changes. He cornered Lotor after a particularly hard and hot trek along the desert.

“I think we should go hunting,” Lance suggested. “The meat is getting really low.”

Lotor nodded and stood up, ready to move out onto the night. Lance sighed and followed him.

“Stay with the Princess,” Lotor instructed quietly. “One of us should watch over her.”

“She’s capable of looking after herself.” Lance crossed his arms. “I would like to go hunting, but I’m not a very good tracker.”

Lotor nodded and moved on again. Lance waited until they had reached far enough from their campsite before stopping Lotor again.

“What happened? Why are you and Allura not talking any more?” Lance queried bluntly.

Lotor regarded him briefly before continuing to study the ground before him for tracks.

“Would it really be that much of a bother to answer me, Your Highness?” Lance sounded annoyed.

Lotor looked at him again. “Nothing happened. I’m just coming to terms with certain issues.”

“Like?”

“What are you now? My therapist? Piss off,” Lotor snarled and moved on again.

“It’s because she doesn’t love you, isn’t it?” Lance sighed. “Well, Sherlock, everyone knew this! Only you were fooling yourself.”

“Lance, go paint my castle.” Lotor moved with a fluid motion and to Lance’s outmost surprise, he seemed to vanish.

“For the love of...” Lance threw his arms up in defeat and returned to the campsite.

“Allura, what’s going on with Lotor? Why is he so crabby? I mean, more so than usual?”

Allura sighed. “Lance, have you ever been rejected?”

“You’ve been rejecting him for years!” Lance protested.

“I think he just realised it now,” Allura stated sadly. “He’s not coping well. Also, he’s lost everything else. Doom is no more. His father is dead. He’s got nothing left.” She shook her head. “I believe that he has completely lost the will to live. That’s why he’s talking about storming the castle, infested as it is with those soldiers. He doesn’t stand a chance and he knows it, but he doesn’t care. I think he wants to die.”

“So what do we do?”

“There’s nothing we can do. We can’t bring anything back for him.”

Allura looked down at her hands and remained quiet. She hadn’t meant to hurt Lotor. She had simply repeated to him what she had already stated several times in the past. She credited his current tender emotional state on all the recent events that he had undergone. Still, this did not make her feel better. She disliked hurting people and for better or worse, she did care about Lotor. He was just a soldier following orders from his superior officer. Why he had never broken away from his father’s corruption was quite beyond her understanding. She figured he was not aware of anything else and was too immersed in his life to see beyond it.

She thought about the destruction and harm he had brought to her planet. She hated him for his actions, and could not easily forgive him. She remembered all the suffering he had caused other people from several other planets. The slavery, the grief, the countless unnecessary deaths... Allura shook her head. She was not ready to forgive Lotor, nor could she claim love for him after his vile deeds.

Her heart clutched in confusion. Having been travelling with Lotor since their crash, she had met a different side of him. Lotor had never attempted to do anything to her, although she had no doubts that if he had wanted, he would have taken whatever he wanted from her very easily. Even with Lance around, she was still vulnerable. She had seen the damage he had done to armoured men while still bound. She had did not doubt that he could be far deadlier free. Yet, he had done nothing but try to comfort her, even though his eyes betrayed the strange tranquillity he was exposing.

Meanwhile, Lotor, who had simply used the night itself to hide, found a tall rock and sat, gazing out onto the starry night.

Then this is all I have lived for. He shook his head. A home that is no more, a woman who loves another man and now being trapped on a planet where everyone hates me. I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if I had been raised differently. Perhaps if my mother had not been killed, I would not have turned out to be the monster I’ve become. He scowled. And since when does it all matter? Since when have I concerned myself with what others think about me? He sighed loudly. The answer, of course, is as obvious and solid as the rock I’m sitting on. Everything changed when I fell in love with Allura. The very name brought him agony anew. But it’s all over now. All the foolish fantasies I once harboured are gone... Drifted away like meaningless flotsam and jetsam. I am as empty as I once was when my mother, Vulpes and Lupus were taken from me. I never thought I would feel thus again. He scowled. Father! Accused be you! You didn’t break me enough. I can still feel emotion and I still pine over love. Why did you not foresee this and made me as you were? Why am I so weak? He locked his jaw. I am supposed to be as you were! Vicious, heartless and cruel, not this snivelling, pathetic creature, sitting on a rock crying over a chick! He groaned. You failed and I am to pay for it.

Lotor buried his face in his hands and locked his jaw. His mind was an open sore of anguish and he wanted nothing more than to find a dark, cold hole, crawl into it and never come out again. He wanted to cry, but pride prohibited him from indulging in such an innocent act. Instead, he raised his head and with a primordial roar, released his grief the only way he could.

Allura heard the cry and shut her eyes against it. Tears, however, did find a way out of her eyes and Lance sat, confused as to what to do. Finally, Allura went to him, looking for comfort, and cried on his shoulder until she exhausted herself into a tormented sleep.

The following day, they set out again shrouded in a leaden mood. Lotor walked a fair distance ahead of them, quiet and sombre. His eyes were constantly darting, scouting the area around him. That’s when he saw shapes heading in his direction. He stopped and waited for Allura and Lance to reach him.

“There.” He pointed and offered nothing else.

Lance and Allura squinted into the distance and by and by realised what the shapes were. Allura smiled and ran towards them. Lance followed enthusiastically. Lotor sighed and waited for some moments before finally trailing after them, at a much slower pace.

Even then, he saw as Allura ran into the Keith’s arms and hugged him fiercely. Lotor locked his jaw against the ache in his heart and kept his vision unfocused. Allura was

laughing by the time he reached them but when she saw him, she pulled away from Keith and sighed.

“Lotor, are you okay?” Keith sounded concerned, misunderstanding Lotor’s state for an actual physical malady.

“Fine.” Lotor continued on walking past the Voltron Force.

Pidge stared confused at Lotor’s retreating back and looked expectantly at Allura for an explanation. Receiving none, he turned to Hunk, who simply shrugged, just as mystified.

Allura motioned with her head for everyone to follow. Lance explained briefly to the others what had happened and Keith scowled, feeling awful about Lotor’s situation. It wasn’t until after dusk Lotor called a halt on their march and they set camp. Lotor chose a remote spot and sipped water slowly, having no appetite. He regarded his surroundings, slowly trying to find a way to engage in any form of battle so that he could either liberate his anger or simply get killed and end his suffering.

“Princess, what happened exactly?” Keith asked quietly, looking at Lotor.

“Many things, Keith. He’s hurting and there’s nothing any of us can do other than put him in a ship and send him back to Doom.” Allura looked sadly at Lotor. “We can only hope that he’ll feel better after that. For better or for worse, he was at least healthy when he was doing his pointless conquering. He really doesn’t have much left now and it’s a matter of time before he heals. You know that he’ll not accept help from us. He’s too proud and he doesn’t really know us. What he needs is a friend and unfortunately, he does not consider any of us that.”

Keith nodded his head. “Lance mentioned something about a let down.”

Allura crossed her arms. “Well, Lance’s got a big mouth!”

“Princess, what happened?” Keith insisted.

“I told him how I felt and for a change he actually listened to me” Allura heaved a deep sigh. “Keith, I’m feeling really bad about this whole thing. I didn’t want to hurt him.”

“Princess, at least now he knows it’s over.” Keith cheered to himself. *It’s about time too, Blueberry. The Princess is MINE!* “Maybe he’ll stop tormenting you now and you can finally carry on with your life.”

“Keith! I may very well be the cause of his death. He’s suicidal. I can’t possibly live thinking that he died because he felt there was nothing left for him to live for.”

“It’s not your fault!”

“It doesn’t make it any easier, Keith. All I wish is for him to get better. I don’t want to see him hurt or dead.” Allura stood up and looked in Lotor’s direction. “I’ll be back.”

“Princess...”

“It’s okay, Keith. He would never hurt me. We both know that.”

“But you just said he’s unpredictable. Besides, maybe he needs time alone.” *And I really don’t want you two to make up. I mean, you do belong to me.*

Allura smiled lightly. “Keith, everything will be okay.” She went to Lotor.

The Prince of Doom heard the soft steps approaching him, and he didn’t have to look to know who it was. He swallowed a snarl of impatience and stood, ready to move away.

“Lotor,” Allura called quietly. “Please, talk to me. You’ve been avoiding me for days now. I can’t take it any more. Please.”

Lotor stopped but kept his back to her. “What do you want?”

“I want to know what’s causing you so much grief. Is it what I told you or Doom’s destruction?”

“Just leave me alone,” Lotor snapped.

“I will not!” Allura retorted annoyed and pulled him around so that he would be facing her; her strength surprised him. “I’m sorry I don’t love you! I can’t just pretend or lie to you! And quite frankly, I don’t think you love me either; you just have a fantasy in your mind and I happen to be the main character in it. Lotor, think for a moment! You meet hundreds of women every day and you do as you wish with them. Why am I so important? Is it because I won’t submit? Or maybe because I didn’t fall into your arms when I first saw you? Lotor, do you honestly know what love is?”

Lotor looked down at the hand holding his arm and then back at Allura. He repeated this motion twice more times before Allura released him hesitantly. He then crossed his arms and cocked his head.

“Why don’t you just save your breath?” He arched an eyebrow. “Go back there and roast some marshmallows over the fire and sing some corny songs with the team,” he

sneered. "Leave me be. As you said, you don't care either way, so why are you here tormenting me?"

"That's not true! I do care about you," she snarled angrily.

"Oh can it, Princess, I don't need nor want your pity."

Allura reached the end of her patience. Before she could even consider it, she slapped Lotor hard across the face. He narrowed his eyes at her and she stood more in shock over her own actions than at actually hitting him.

"I'm getting quite sick of this habit of yours," he warned quietly, his voice almost a throaty growl. "Let's establish something once and for all. You hit me, I'll hit you back. Understood?"

"I'm so sorry..." She put her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide. "I didn't mean to..."

Lotor looked flatly at her. "Oh? It's that easy, eh? Well, I'm sorry too, I never meant to blow up Arus all those times I did!" He walked away.

Allura startled and went after him. "How can you expect me to love you anyway? With that kind of attitude, you should be happy I don't hate you!"

"Whatever."

"Don't 'whatever' me, Lotor!" She stopped; arms akimbo. "And furthermore, if you want to wade in this miserable sea you've cast yourself into, fine! I'm not going to help you get out any more. Why can't you be less pig-headed?!"

"You're one to talk!" He turned to her.

"Don't even think about placing the blame on me!"

"Oh, just leave me alone, Princess Allura."

"Stop addressing me by title! You've never done it in the past!"

"Ooh! I'm so sorry!" Lotor widened his eyes ironically. "I was fantasising!"

Allura moved again to not slap Lotor, but to throttle him. Lotor watched her come and caught her wrists before she could reach him. He twisted them wide and applied just enough pressure to make Allura cringe. Still she struggled against his vice-like grasp and tried to move towards him.

"I would recommend you quit while you're ahead," Lotor cautioned simply, not an ounce of effort showing on his face.

Allura seemed to get more furious by this. "You know well enough that I can't fight you! Why are you hurting me?"

"So that you won't hurt me." He narrowed his eyes warningly. "I'm going to let you go and you're going to leave me alone, deal?"

"No!" she spat back. "Lotor, listen to me, please! I never meant to hurt you. I can't help the way I feel! In fact, I'm finding you a much better person than I thought you were since this whole ordeal started. You can be kind and gentle in your own way. For all you that you claim to be, you have another side that you try to stifle. Let it come out" Her eyes filled with tears. "Please."

Lotor sighed and released her. "Just leave me."

"No..." She hugged him tightly. "I can't stand to look at you and see you hurting so much."

"So you would sacrifice your own happiness for mine?"

Allura looked up at him. "Yes..."

He pulled her away. "That I will not tolerate." He backed away another step. "Just leave me be. I'll be okay." He took another step back.

"Lotor..."

"Honestly, I'll be fine."

Allura sighed in defeat and went back to the others. She was clearly upset and crawled into her bedroll. Keith could see her shaking softly, wiping her face on the material of the bedroll to dry her tears. Lance moved to talk to her but was politely shunned by the Princess, who curled into a foetal position.

Keith hesitated staring at Allura then glanced towards Lotor, who he could barely discern in the nocturnal umbra. His mind made up, he marched to where Lotor had camped himself.

"Lotor, what the heck did you say to the Princess?" Keith demanded.

"Piss off, little man!" Lotor snapped. "Am I cursed to never find peace tonight?!"

"Not until you tell me why the Princess is bawling her eyes out," Keith growled.

Lotor stood up and grabbed Keith by the throat. “Go ask her yourself! I have no time for the likes of you!” He threw Keith away. “And why would you be asking me of all people? Go over there and ask your sweetheart what afflicts her! And before you accuse me of anything, just remember that she’s the one who came over here to disturb me.” He paused. “One more thing. I’ll make your life easier. She loves you. So go back and be happy.” Lotor moved into the night.

Keith sat up slowly, rubbing his neck. “Did she tell you that or did you just assume?”

“Oh trust me! She did a fine job of turning my heart into minced meat!”

Keith started, not having expected Lotor of all people to confirm that Allura felt the same about him as he did her.

Ha! Blueberry, I win. He stifled a smile.

However, he felt a twinge of guilt. Despite their perpetual disagreements, it was against the most fundamental of Keith’s emotions to harbour negative thoughts against anyone.

“Look.” Keith finally controlled his mirth. “Regardless of that, you going around pitying yourself because she won’t let you ravish her isn’t going over too well. She cares about you, although I’m not sure why, and you should know as well as I do, that it’s bothering her to no end that she has hurt you. She doesn’t deserve that and if you cared at all for her, you’d understand.” He walked away.

“Piss off!” Lotor yelled and disappeared into the night.

Allura looked up slowly as she felt a hand touch her arm gently. Keith looked warmly at her. She sniffled and sat up.

“Princess, are you going to be all right?” Keith asked.

She shook her head. “It’s okay. I just worry over Lotor. I mean, when you think about it, he’s stuck here in Arus with us. At least we have each other, but he’s all alone with people he doesn’t know, who he distrusts and who distrust him. I don’t think he’s fairing all that well. I have tried to bridge that, but it’s not working.”

“Princess, Lotor’s shutting himself from the rest of us. You can’t blame yourself for that. It’s really up to him to figure things out for himself. Please don’t blame yourself for his childishness,” Keith said. “It bothers me when you’re hurting because...” Keith stopped himself.

“Because of what?” Allura prompted.

“Well, you know.” Keith blushed.

Allura moved towards Keith and kissed him deeply. Keith startled but responded just as ardently. Somewhere in the night, a shape moved further on.

The Force awoke and was unable to find Lotor anywhere. Keith saw obvious tracks left behind for them to follow, but could not spot the Prince of Doom, although the desert was mainly open and offered extremely few hiding spots. Keith actually admired Lotor’s resourcefulness and training. Allura regarded her surroundings sadly, and looked at Keith before continuing on again.

The previous night had been everything she had ever imagined her first kiss with Keith would be like. He had been gentle and just as hesitant as she. Allura had teased him and he had blushed. Oddly, she had found it very charming. She had never really believed that Keith was as inexperienced as Lance often mentioned. To her, it had all been a joke between the guys.

It wasn’t until two days later that they came across an oasis. They had expected to find Lotor there, but instead they had found food packed for them and nothing more. They stopped and rested, and Allura grew increasingly upset and worried. Even the furtive kisses she shared with Keith at night had not cheered her up.

Late one night, after everyone had fallen asleep, she got up and moved away from the camp. She wandered in the dark for sometime, making sure never to lose sight of the campfire, which worked as a beacon to direct her back.

“Lotor?” she finally called out. “I know you’re out here. Please come out...” she pleaded. “I’m cold and I’m tired but I must speak with you. It’s very important!”

Allura continued moving further and further into the night, tears blurring her vision. She called to Lotor over and over until her voice went hoarse but still she kept on moving and calling. When she thought she could go no further and was about to give up and fall, she felt strong arms about her.

"It's foolish to be out here at this hour," Lotor snarled. "Go back to the camp, and stay there!"

Allura held his forearms. "Lotor, please, where have you been? I've been so worried about you..." She was almost delirious.

"I've been travelling alongside you all this time. Do not worry about me," he explained in a tight voice, and picked her up as she suddenly collapsed. "Foolish woman!" He began to carry her back to the camp.

Allura, as tired as she was, did not realise at first where she was and who was carrying her. A few moments later, she finally regained her senses and opened her eyes again. She could vaguely make out Lotor's face under the moon, but his hair seemed to glow in a silvery cascade and his eyes held an alien lambency, since they were endowed with dark vision. She wondered, distractedly, what it would be like to run her fingers through the long, thick mane.

She was about to protest about being carried, but thought better of it. Oddly enough she felt safe in his arms and saw as the campfire's light grew brighter as they approached it. Finally Lotor stopped some distance away and put her down.

"Don't try anything foolish like this again. I'll not make myself known and I'm not bringing you back. Don't stray away from the others. The desert now holds many hazards and you're just endangering yourself by wandering about like this."

"Then why are you wandering it?" Allura demanded, still feeling unsteady. "Lotor, please..."

"Go back to Keith's arms!" Lotor snapped and left again.

"Lotor!" Allura screamed.

"Quiet!" Lotor hissed from behind her.

Allura jumped and looked surprised at him. "How do you do that?"

Lotor shrugged. "Magic." He paused. "What do you want?"

"I want you to understand that..."

Lotor interrupted. "How many times are you going to rip my heart open? What else is there to understand? You love Keith, he loves you. The end. Thanks for coming out and all that jazz. I don't think there's anything else to be explained here. Now kindly leave me alone."

"At least he's decent!" Allura cried.

"Oh, yeah, right! Really decent!" Lotor put his hands on his hips. "Let's see, it took him less than five minutes after I told him that you loved him to rush over to you and get a smooch! How chivalrous. It's people like Keith that make people like me not look half as bad."

Allura looked shocked. "What?!"

Lotor shrugged. "What? Surprised your knight in shining armour took advantage of your weakness?" He shook his head. "Sorry for shattering your dream."

Allura looked even more upset and ran back to the camp. She shook Keith out of his roll and stared piercingly at him.

"You're an opportunist!" she yelled at him, waking the others.

Keith looked startled and confused at Allura. "Princess..."

"You just took advantage over the fact that was upset and I opened my heart! How could you? I thought I could trust you. I thought you had come to me out of sincerity." Allura shook her head. "You just said what you did because Lotor opened his big mouth! Well, I won't have it!" She stormed away and went to her bedroll. "And don't bother apologising! I don't want to hear it."

Keith remained still, too shocked to really move or say anything. Finally, shaking his head, he cursed Lotor wherever he was in the night. *You had no right of telling Allura anything. I was trying to help you, damn you!* He crawled back into his roll and eventually fell asleep.

In the dark, Lotor smiled for the first time in many days. *I'm not giving up my Kitten that easily, little man.*

The journey continued without further incidents. The tension was nearly palpable between Allura and Keith, making the others uncomfortable, but they were impotent to interfere in the events taking place. Allura thought about all that had happened during the trip, and was surprised in finding herself feeling more sorry for Lotor, than the burning hatred she usually harboured against him.

Further thoughts were, however, interrupted by Lotor's sudden appearance in the group. He motioned ahead with his head.

"The castle is within sight," he announced quietly. "Lance, you said you had a plan of sorts." He turned to Allura. "And I promised you I would behave this time."

Allura remained quiet, too shocked to say anything in response.

"Well, you seem to be able to appear and disappear at will. I think you should go in first and scout. Once we know how armed they are and how many of them there are, we can start our attack." Lance paused. "I figured you can start the mayhem from inside and then we'll come in from the rear. They won't be expecting that."

"You hope." Lotor arched an eyebrow. "But we'll do it as you say."

Keith gritted his teeth, upset at being left out of the planning although he could offer no better idea than Lance's. He thought about this promise Lotor had mentioned but knew Allura would not be willing to talk to him. He fumed in quiet frustration.

Lotor moved away from them again, making his way to the castle like a shadow. The five pilots followed as quietly and inconspicuous as they could. They did see Lotor scaling the side of the building and soon after disappearing into the castle through a window. They waited patiently for his re-emergence.

Without pausing, Lotor scouted the castle efficiently. To his surprise, he met very few guards, who he dispatched rather easily. He armoured and armed himself and continued on his way through the stronghold.

Still, he found no resistance. Reaching the secondary control room, he saw a woman sitting at the controls up-linking a message. Lotor narrowed his eyes and waited for the transmission to end before moving in.

The woman jumped up when he leapt into the room, sword drawn and ready to be hurled.

"Where are the others?" he demanded.

She looked defiantly at him. "They have moved on."

Lotor nodded. It had been just as he had suspected. They had destroyed Arus as they had Doom, making it unnecessary to post guards behind and weaken the main force. Lotor was willing to wager that the few guards he had met were simply to keep the Queen informed of the events on Arus.

"When's your next transmission due?" Lotor asked.

"At the end of the week," she replied passively.

Lotor nodded and moved too fast for the woman to even react. Sheathing the blade, he rushed forward, grabbed her by the shoulders and sat her on a different chair. He found loose wires and used them to bind her firmly. He then went to the console and turned on the loud speakers.

"I'm in the control room. Come in." And he opened the main doors of the castle.

The pilots met even fewer guards and Hunk made a quick job out of them. They ran into the control room and saw Lotor standing casually with a woman.

"I recommend you keep her and make her send the weekly reports to her Queen, simply because of the signature," Lotor instructed. "This will give you at least some time. Now I will take my leave of you."

"But Doom is destroyed," Allura stated helplessly.

"It can be rebuilt."

"Lotor, ever heard of the term strength in numbers?" Lance blinked innocently.

"I'm not going to remain here with the likes of you," Lotor retorted acidly, his eyes encompassing everyone in the room. "I am not going to help you rebuild your planet. I am going back to Doom now and I'm going to start my own Empire and clean up the mess left behind." He smirked. "Think of the good news. I won't be here harassing you for some time anyway. Enjoy the peace." He started towards the door. "See ya." And he left.

Keith stared hatefully at the retreating image. "Okay, team, let's find out just how much damage they have done to the planet."

"And the Lions," Pidge put in.

"Do you think they found the Lions?" Hunk scowled, concerned.

"If this was a complete rout, then we can be sure that the Lions have been targeted," Keith sounded pained. "However, they are well hidden and secured. Perhaps there's still hope."

Allura looked about the room and suddenly gasped. She had feared encountering the visage, and had even wished during her travel with Lotor across the desert never to reach the

castle. On the corner were two bloated cadavers. She thought distantly that the ventilation was keeping the room pure from the mephitic miasma

“Oh, Nanny! Koran!” She cried out and fell to her knees, burying her face in her hands.

The other pilots spun to see what had so distraught the Princess and gasped as well upon seeing the ghastly sight. Keith locked his jaw grimly. He would find Formalhaut and his Queen. And he would kill them both.