

Warning: Angst, violence.

Prologue

“Madam.” Mauld offered the silver haired woman a seat. “How does today find you?”

She sat down and looked up at him. “Bored.”

Mauld studied the scant golden strands of her hair, glinting in the light of Akhronidion coming through the window. “I thought your charge was keeping you entertained.”

She shrugged. “He’s not very responsive, drugged as he is.”

“That is for the safety...”

“Stuff it,” she interrupted. “I don’t know why you insist in thinking that I’m still a helpless child. You, of all people, should know that I’m not.”

He nodded slowly. “I am just worried that he may go berserk. Milady, he is a phenomenal fighter.”

Vulpine eyes regarded him with detached ennui. “I can hold my own.”

“I am aware of that fact also.” Mauld sighed. *But must you be so stubborn?! You are just like your brother... In fact, you are just like every other member in your family.*

“Stop administering the drugs. I want him conscious the next time I see him.”

“He is conscious.”

She stood up and her cold eyes locked him in place. “Don’t play the idiot with me, Mauld. I have no patience for such nonsense. I want the King awake and responsive, not drooling, unable to even lift his head. If all you want is a babysitter, then go out and find one. I’m not up for the job. I came here to break something, and you’re now denying me my toy.”

“But if he attacks, you are going to kill him,” Mauld stated.

“My orders are not to kill him,” she retorted. “Therefore, he will not suffer such a fate.”

“And do I dare trust you to follow my orders?”

“No. But then, the orders didn’t come from you, but from Abbot Bÿsmann.”

Mauld looked amused. *Aye, you are quite defiant...And you also know how to sting.* “I will speak with His Excellency...”

“Since when are you his lap dog?” she interrupted again.

“I cannot overrule his orders, Milady. Can you not understand that?”

“All I understand is that I was sent here to carry out a mission and it’s flawed because my target is not responding accordingly. How am I supposed to know if the treatment I’m dealing is working or not? Tell me that, Mauld.” She paused. “Furthermore, you’re treating me like an object made of spun glass...”

“Which you are not,” he concluded and bowed his head. “I extend my apologies.”

She studied the hybrid briefly. “And what has been expiring outside the Main?”

“The usual. Wars, politics... the typical matters that you do not care for.”

“And my brother?”

“He is faring well. He is too stubborn to be killed. He is creating his share of mayhem.”

“Or are you having him do it for you as you do with everyone else?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Your brother may be many things, but I assure you that a puppet he is not. He only follows orders if it proves beneficial for him.” Mauld paused. “And do tell, Milady, why have you not gone to see him yet? You are aware that you have leave to do thus.”

“I think it would be wiser if I do not emerge in his life at this time. Sometimes things are better left unsaid or undone.”

Mauld nodded. “And yet, you miss him.”

“He was the only one I had after a time,” she began. “And although I blamed him for not saving me from my fate, I later realised that he wasn’t to blame. He was not much older than me and just another victim of our father.”

“You never did tell me what happened,” Mauld commented.

“And do you really care?” Vulpine eyes fixed him steadily.

“I know not what else to do or say to make you believe that I have no intentions of hurting you...” *And that I...* He shook his head, purging the thought.

“Mauld, to you I’m no more than a female. Like all Drule, you think you can swagger towards me and assume you will get pleasure simply because of what you have betwixt your legs.” She put a hand on her hip. “Think again, pal.”

“I have never treated you like that.” Mauld’s eyes shifted, amusement leaving him

fleetingly. "I have always bestowed you with proper respect."

"And you have done a phenomenal job of it." She bowed her head mockingly.

"I hope one day you come to realise that not everyone is out to hurt you. That some of us care about you."

"Do you?"

Mauld smiled. "If you find a need to question that, Milady, I suppose I should work harder at pleasing you." *Or you are just too blind to see.* "I beg your leave; there are matters I must attend to." He bowed and left the room.

She sat on the window sill and watched the bustle of activity without, lost in thought. *You resent me, Mauld, because you do not understand why you have failed to work your Psionics on me so many times. Yet, I dare not tell you, or anyone else, that the Monarks protect me from everything. None will ever be able to harm me again so long as I carry on with them dwelling me.*

Even if the prospect of our inhabitanacy within your mind and body means your premature death? Came a questioning flutter in her mind.

There are consequences to every action, she responded nonchalantly. *You will draw all my energy and leave naught but a husk, however, until that time comes, I want to live independently and be strong. That, my pet, is where you come in.*

A parasitic relationship turned symbiotic... How interesting. It's not often we find such willing hosts, the sexless voices sounded amused.

Everything is a matter of perspective.

The Fateful Meeting

"Push the button!" Lance cried out suddenly, jostled about in the cockpit of the Lion's head that had been once his craft but was now an integral part of Voltron. They had entered Eighteen's atmosphere and the turbulence was buffeting them viciously. In addition, they still had Abaddon hooked to them, exploding as they travelled. "The heads come apart from the body!"

"What button?!" Sven demanded.

"The eject button!"

"There's no eject button! They're all jammed. Stop fibbing!" Pidge snapped.

"It's true!" Lance screamed back and decided to demonstrate. "See ya!"

"Lance!" Pidge called after him.

"It's the polka-dot button," Lance instructed. "Hit it and you'll be gone from the main body."

"Polka-dot button?" Hunk asked flatly.

"Hey man!" Lance said defensively. "I didn't design this. All I did was hang my fuzzy dice up in my pit. If the engineers got bored and added strange coloured buttons, it's really no skin off my back."

"How did you know that that button was the eject button?"

Lance shrugged and held up a book. "There was a 'User's Manual' in the glove compartment."

"There's no glove compartment!" Hunk retorted and then groaned. "I forgot who I was talking to. Of course Red Lion would have a bloody glove compartment!"

Sven rolled his eyes. "Freaks... You're all freaks." But he pushed the button nevertheless.

As the blue head left the main body, the other pilots heard a noise coming from Sven, which could only be described as yodelling. Lance shook his head, then burst out laughing at the Swede's antics. His mirth, however, was stifled abruptly when he realised that there was no way to navigate the head. He was going to crash onto terra firma quite firmly since the controls had been interconnected and to make Voltron function as a single unit.

Heck, Princess! Lance's thoughts defaulted Allura back to her old title out of habit. *There were no tests! Voltron was not yet ready to be taken out on a maiden voyage, let alone fight a hoard of Nephillims! And the heads are not operational on their own.* He paused. *If we get out of this, I'll be sure to mention this set back.*

He was, however, relieved to see the yellow and green heads also detach from the main body just as another explosion ripped through the two robots, sending them apart. A huge hole gaped in Voltron's midsection and the robot began a mad spin towards the ground.

"Lance?" Pidge asked thoughtfully.

“Yes?”

“Whatever possessed you to look in the glove compartment?”

“Well, as much as I love pancakes, I did not fancy becoming one. Then I decided to follow logic and looked in the glove compartment. Think about it, where else would you keep a manual?” Lance grinned. “I’ll bet you would have never thought of doing that.”

“And you would be absolutely right,” Pidge replied almost numb. “Whoever thought of such ridiculous idea?! He should be shot and hanged!”

“Probably...” Lance let out a screech as a cloud suddenly engulfed him and rendered completely blind. “Guys, turn on you homing devices. I think this will be like last time and we’re all going to get lost again.”

“On Doom, no less,” Sven grumbled. “Oh, how I despise this place.”

“If it makes you feel better, they did change the name.” Lance smirked.

“Until this place is known as The Valley of Bliss, I don’t want to be here.”

“Do you want some petunias planted too?” Hunk queried curiously.

“How about some cotton-candy vendors?” Pidge added.

“Will you shut up!” Sven snapped.

“Calm down,” Lance scolded quietly. “We’re just trying to make light of things. Sven, it won’t do to have you so stressed out. We’re going to crash on Doom and that’s that. The Queen’s floating somewhere in space surrounded by the Nephillim and that madman. Who knows what’s become of her? We have to land, go to the castle, rescue the Queen and Keith and then take off.”

Sven sighed loudly. “I don’t want to make light of anything, Lance. We’re in serious trouble and it’s not going to go away by us cracking jokes.”

Lance looked resigned. “Fine, I’m sorry, okay?”

“Impact in seven minutes,” Pidge announced. “It’s going to hurt.”

“Oh, probably,” Hunk said dismissively, not wanting to think of it.

“It’s gonna do a lot more than just hurt,” Sven commented sadly.

“You’ve destroyed it then?” Zheppo asked.

“Abaddon and Voltron have fallen,” Mauld replied, in a noncommittal tone. “We are enroute to examine the fuselage. They have crashed on Province Eighteen. I have the Queen of Arus in captivity aboard Fury.”

Zheppo nodded. “Mauld, what did you tell General Sincine? Queen Merla is seeking an audience with me.”

“Milord, I told him nothing more than what has been happening,” Mauld sighed. “Furie seems to be out of touch with the happenings of the Dark Ring...” He cocked his head. “They knew not that Doom was now a Province of the Empire.”

Zheppo snorted derisively. “Perhaps it’s time they were eliminated.”

“Your Eminence, methinks that eliminating the Queen would prove most unwise. Furie is populated by strong Psions, and the Queen now also possesses the Brethan. This could prove a beneficial addition to the Empire. If you eliminate her, the Psions on the planet might rebel and controlling them will prove rather difficult, especially if they combine their power in an attack. They could cause substantial damage ere we are able to overtake them. With the Queen in power, she can be in command over them. T’is really just a matter of removing her strongest weapon.”

“General Sincine?”

Mauld smiled subtly. “Aye, Sire. He is her strength. Without him, she may not be so keen on moving against you... In fact, despite her military prowess, I believe she would be much more hesitant to deploy her forces without a good commander to lead them. After all, she has good reason to trust him so blindly. He was only a half of a mark away from entering Honour Roll in the Academy for Military Tactics and he is the strongest living Psion.”

“And how do you propose we go about this?”

“A Rook.” He paused. “Not just any Rook, but the very best one...”

Zheppo looked disgusted. “According to the brotherhood, a female is our best Rook. Bah! How can a female be better than a man?”

“The lady Morphay has proved her worth several times, Milord. She does not lack in ability.”

“And this coming from a Bishop...” Zheppo regarded Mauld thoughtfully. “It still does not change the fact that she’s a female.”

“Regardless of gender, she will accomplish the job. She has never failed. In truth,

from what I have been able to disinter from the archives, several attempts have been made to remove her for that very reason, and all without success. She has eliminated every single Piece that has moved against her. Do not forget how easily she dispatched Viceroy Throk. I think Your Lordship should give her the Game.”

“And if she fails?”

“There are other Rooks. She is expendable.”

Zheppo nodded. “Very well, Mauld.” He paused. “Should any of the pilots survive the crash, send them to the Main. I want to execute them myself.”

“As you wish, Milord,” Mauld bowed as the screen blanked. *Oh, go away... I need to rest! And a shower would be quite pleasant too... This uniform is definitely starting to develop a personality of its own.* “Step smartly now,” he commanded the men in the bridge. “Set Fury at full speed to Eighteen and I want a search party to scour the area. You heard, His Excellency. If you find survivors, bring them back... Oh, and do be gentle. We do not want to break the toys.” He sat back on his chair and biting back the pain, began a Psionic scan on the impact zone for survivors.

“Are you alive?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Sort of..”

Lotor rolled to his back with a groan. “I told that foolish retard that anger would make him falter. He missed every vital organ when he stabbed me.”

“Perhaps he was hoping that you would have died of blood loss or something,” Hazar commented, taking inventory of his own body. “I mean, it certainly makes it a gorier and dramatic death...”

“Spare me...” Lotor whimpered. “I heal too quickly for that. You should know that.”

“Details.” Hazar rolled to his side and cringed at the pain. “So now what?”

“Well, I suppose we should go back to the castle before we die of exposure.”

Painfully, the two men crawled more than walked to Hazar’s fighter. They sat at the controls, head spinning and feeling engorged.

“Dude... This is just not cool,” Hazar moaned.

“Reminds me the time we decided to gang up against those guys in our first zero-G class.”

“Whose stupid idea was that anyway?” Hazar looked thoughtful. “Oh yes, of course! Yours.”

Lotor huffed a curse.

“Dude, taking the adepts in our first zero-G lesson was not smart.”

“I was young. I was allowed to make mistakes.”

“You’re old and you’re still making mistakes.”

“Whose side are you on, anyway?”

Hazar chuckled and grabbed the controls. “It’s gonna be bumpy. Strap yourself in.”

“What the heck is that?” Lotor asked pointing in the distance.

“A shooting star?” Hazar hazarded.

“Let’s go see.”

True to their primordial nature, both men forgot completely about their predicament and set off after the flash they had seen in the sky. By the time they reached the crash site, they were in high spirits and curious to know what was expiring.

“Would you look at that...” Hazar hopped out of the fighter. “That’s a Nephillim.”

Lotor scowled. “And what the heck is that thing?”

“That used to be Voltron,” came a strangled voice from behind.

Lotor and Hazar jumped at the sound. They spun around and saw Lance stumbling towards them. Lance looked battered, but was trying his best to keep himself erect and look as if he were taking a casual stroll.

“What are you doing here?” Lotor asked.

“Oh...” Lance waved a dismissing hand. “The Queen decided to rescue Keith and then we got ambushed by this guy named Mauld...” He scowled at Lotor. “Hey! Wait a minute. You’re alive.”

Lotor exchanged looks with Hazar.

“Maybe he hit his head,” Hazar offered with a shrug.

Lance sighed. “No, I mean, that madman said that Keith killed you... And you.” He pointed at Hazar. “Then he said that Keith was the Viceroy of Doom, or whatever it was that

he called this planet.”

Lotor blinked in confusion. “Say what?!”

Lance shrugged. “Hey man! I know nothing. I would rather be elsewhere too... Say, where’s Keith?” He cocked his head. “And not to alarm you anything, but you’re bleeding quite profusely there.” He pointed with his chin.

Lotor and Hazar looked down and seemed to recollect that they were indeed quite injured.

“Keith did get at us. And I suppose we looked dead when he left and that’s why he said what he did.” Lotor grimaced. “But Mauld...”

“That guy knows too much.” Hazar cursed. “He’s always there no matter what. Sometimes I wonder if there are actually several of him. He can’t be everywhere at the same time like he seems to be.”

“Say,” Lance began casually. “Since you guys don’t look busy, how about you help me find the others. For whatever reason this stupid thing is not working.” He pointed to the homing device in his hand. “We all crashed here, except for the Queen.”

“Where’s she?” Lotor asked warily.

“Well, last I saw her she was floating up in space...”

“Lance...” Lotor narrowed his eyes. “You seem a bit too casual about all of this.”

“I know.”

Lotor stared at him in confusion. “Out with it, man!”

“Okay...” Lance fell forward, quite unconscious.

“Ah ha! He did hit his head.” Hazar pointed and shrugged at Lotor’s glare. “What?! I was right.”

“Hazar, let me tell you something that...” Lotor groaned. “Uh oh... Mauld’s coming.”

“I would rather you not tell me that.”

“No, you dingbat! Behind you. Fury is coming.”

Hazar hung his head. “Maybe I should join Lance... He looks so gleeful out of it.”

“Not a chance... Come, help me move him.”

Do not bother, I know you are there.

“Eek!” Lotor squeaked.

Hazar stared strangely at him and began to laugh.

“Didn’t you hear that?!” Lotor said upset.

“Hear what?” Hazar asked trying to control his laughter.

“The...” Lotor stopped. “I don’t know...” He shook his head. “I guess I hit my head too.”

No, you did not. I am just too tired to Project to both of you, King Lotor. Return to the plateau where you and the Viceroy last fought. I will come to you soon, came the familiar voice again.

Lotor felt dizzy. He massaged his temples and looked at Hazar. “Come, help me out. Let’s get back to Rue.”

“Why?”

“I forgot something.”

“But Fury...”

“...knows we are here,” Lotor interrupted. “Hazar, right now we are at Mauld’s mercy. To fight him will be foolish. If he placed Keith as Viceroy of Eighteen, then obviously he has a plan. We’ll either escape or we’ll be killed. Either way, we are better off with him. Where could we really go? I, for one, am too hurt to survive a long trip and your jet will not make very far. Besides, I really want to know what happened. I don’t even know how long we were out.”

Hazar sighed but complied.

They reached the plateau and debarked gingerly. Mauld was there surrounded by a small phalanx of guards, and his eyes sparkled momentarily before he walked towards them.

“I see the fighter Rue is no more.” Mauld shook his head as if he was grieving the loss. “I am not going to ask you for details.” He blinked slowly. “I am going to send you to the medical bay, get you patched up and then ship you to the Fortress.”

“Hum?” Lotor asked confused.

“You are believed to be dead... all three of you. Let us keep this belief for a while.”

“Mauld...” Lotor gasped as Hazar suddenly fell to the ground, unconscious. At losing his support, he also stumbled and dropped to his knees. The trip back to the plateau had taxed them greatly, even Hazar, who could heal faster. Lotor stayed awake out of sheer

stubbornness. "What's going on?"

"Too much to talk about right now." Mauld turned to the soldiers. "Take them to the bay. Make sure no one enters or leaves."

"So I'm to be your prisoner," Lotor stated.

"For a time, King Lotor." Mauld blinked languidly. "Do not fret however. I plan to wash my hands of you very soon. Keeping you will not be beneficial for my plans. And I know that you do not want to stay here. In the end, we both get our wishes."

Lotor wanted to protest, but succumbed to unconsciousness instead. Mauld inspected each form carefully and plucked the homing device from Lance's hand.

Mauld regarded the guards. "What of the others?"

"They have been moved to Fury, sire," one answered.

"Good. Make preparations for them to be sent to the Main."

"And this one, sire?" he asked pointing to Lance.

"The King seems keen on this one. He will be reported missing. And instruct the medics to do everything in their power to bring the King and the General about. I do not want them to die."

"Aye, sir." The guards saluted and began to move Lotor, Hazar and Lance to Fury's shuttle.

Mauld turned on the vid comm in his jet. "Your Excellency."

"What news, Mauld?" Zheppo demanded.

"We found the wreckage... There are three survivors."

"Excellent" Zheppo looked pleased. "Send them to me immediately."

"Of course, Your Excellency. Expect their arrival by the morrow..." Mauld blinked in an eldritch manner. "And, Sire, I would like to keep the Queen for a while longer."

"Why?"

"For my own amusement and as a weapon against the Viceroy."

"I thought you said you had him under your control." Zheppo narrowed his eyes.

"I do... But it is always good to whip them into complete submission." Mauld's eyes sparkled and his headache intensified.

"Very well, Mauld, you may keep her for a time."

"I thank you, Milord." Mauld bowed as the transmission ended. *All right. I have everything secured. Now I am going to sleep!*

Space Marshall Graham looked shocked. "Destroyed?!"

Commander Hawkins nodded. "I have received reports from Jeff. Queen Allura of Arus took out Lion Voltron to look for Keith, who has been missing for a few days. They were heading for Doom, and all contact has been lost. According to Jeff, all the vital signals from Voltron were disrupted very suddenly, indicating that the robot was destroyed." He paused. "As neither Voltron has been tested, it could have malfunctioned during a battle, or not performed as expected."

"Jeff allowed the Queen to simply up and go?" Graham demanded in shock.

Hawkins shook his head. "He protested against it. However, she is the Queen, and Lion Voltron belongs to Arus. Lance was also powerless to go against her. Rather than let her depart on her own, the crew took their positions."

"And off they went to Doom..." Graham sighed. "I presume Keith went missing right after an unauthorised trip to that accursed planet."

"From the reports I have received from Jeff, it all points that way. He disappeared in the Dark Ring Galaxy."

"Why were they going there?!" Graham insisted. "They know well enough that it's too much of a risk; the Drule is powerful and even that maniac, General Hazar, has warned them to stay back." He wiped a hand roughly over his face. "For crying out loud! Even Lotor has told them to build forces and not to move."

Hawkins smiled humourlessly. "And instead they take a half finished robot into the battlefield..." He shook his head.

Graham sighed. "And it's not even like we can reprimand them... If only it was so easy!"

"We cannot afford to lose them. They were a strong addition to the Alliance."

Graham sighed. "I'm going to contact Doom and find out what I can. I'll keep you posted..." He shut off the comm and began another transmission. "Planet Doom, this is Galaxy Garrison Earth Headquarters, do you copy?"

“Of course,” a sonorous voice replied. “And how may I help whoe'er you are?”

“I am Space Marshal Graham. I would speak with King Lotor of Doom,” he snapped.

“The King is dead.” Violet eyes sparkled from the face that suddenly appeared on the vid screen. “I am Admiral Mauld Impruss of the Drule Empire, acting as spokesman for the Viceroy of Eighteen.”

Graham just stared at the young looking man, puzzled.

“I suppose news travels slow...” Mauld stared amused. “Doom is no more. T'is now Province Eighteen of the Empire under His Excellency, Emperor Zheppo. King Lotor D'ssat has been assassinated by Viceroy Keith Akira.” He cocked his head. “Anything else you would care to know?”

“Viceroy Keith Akira?” Graham asked slowly.

“Imagine that!” Mauld laughed. “Your boy scout now follows His Excellency's wishes, although he still a little indisposed at the moment. But his health is improving.”

“What of Voltron?”

“Oh, that was torn asunder, I am afraid.” Mauld sighed dramatically. “Pity... It looked much better. I also had to sacrifice my own Nephillim to eliminate it”

“And the Queen?”

“She is well.” Mauld blinked languidly. “She is very well.”

“What have you done to her?!” Graham demanded.

“Nothing yet... I just only met her.” Mauld looked amused. “Know you not that you should always behave on the first date?”

Graham banged his fist down on the desk. “You impetuous, good for nothing runt! I demand you release the Queen and Akira immediately.”

“My, my...” Mauld clicked his tongue. “T'is nice to know that you care...” He narrowed his eyes. “You are not even going to ask about the fate that befell the other four pilots?”

Graham ground his teeth. “You...”

“I naught!” Mauld's eyes flicked. “The pilots will be executed by His Excellency's hands in a matter of hours. Viceroy Akira will remain on Province Eighteen, ruling the planet since he was so kind to rid the Empire of D'ssat's ineptitude as a ruler.” He narrowed his eyes. “And you, Space Marshal, will sit still and wait till the Dark Ring deems to grace you worthy enough to be attacked.” He smirked.

“Let me speak with Akira!”

Mauld rolled his eyes. “I will have him contact you when he wakes up. Be assured of that.” He shut off the transmission.

Graham shook in anger. “Get me the Lords!” he commanded.

Lord Cartier and Lord MacDonald entered Graham's office and sat still across from him. The two Lords looked like merry old men, their faces marred by the wrinkles of laughter. They regarded Graham silently, knowing well enough why Graham had summoned the Lords of the Alliance Knights Club.

“It's time to Play,” Graham announced unnecessarily.

“Who's the Opponent?” Cartier asked.

“Admiral Mauld Impruss of the Empire. I need your top Knight.”

“Akira...”

“Has been Checked,” Graham finished. “At least for now. By Playing the Opponent, I am hoping to recover that Piece.”

Cartier and MacDonald exchanged looks. “Well, then that leaves only Saint Lawrence.”

Graham grimaced. “Are you certain there is no other option?”

“You said you want the top Knight. Saint Lawrence is superior to even Akira. I only recommended Akira first because I know you don't like Fenn.” Cartier chuckled. “Not many people do. Our third is, of course, Sven.”

Graham sighed. “He's also been taken.”

Cartier and MacDonald waited for Graham to make up his mind.

“There's no one else?”

“Well, there's always Hawk...” Cartier looked amused.

“No!” Graham looked panicked. “I would rather deal with Fenn...” He paused. “But I don't want him to know the reasons this time.”

“We have to brief the Knights,” Cartier pointed out.

“It's just a matter of telling him that Mauld is going to blow up his house.” MacDonald

smiled. "I wonder when he's going to clue in that we use this excuse every time we don't want to give him a real reason."

Graham sighed. "Send him out. I want Mauld off of the Board."

"You do realise he's a Bishop," MacDonald reminded. "He was trained by Abbot Bÿsmann and although there are only a handful of Bishops, they're even stronger than the Knights. According to all the reports from the Outer Rim Territories, he is the best..."

"He has managed to wreak havoc across the universe in the short time since he arrived. I think he's a formidable ma... creature!" Graham grunted. "And we all know how the Abbot is harsh on the Bishops. If Mauld has succeeded in being crowned with such a title, then he is indeed good."

MacDonald nodded thoughtfully. "Fenn will be sent off as soon as we locate him... Rest assured that the Piece will be eliminated as you wish."

Graham nodded. "Good." He waited till the Lords exited before pressing another button on the control panel in front of him. "Alexandra?"

The vid came alive. "Yes, Thomas?" The woman was in her mid-forties, with fair skin and very light blonde hair. Her face was severe and high cheekbones cut furrows on her very attractive and pale face.

"Keith has been captured and, according to all sources, brainwashed. Lion Voltron is out of commission and Vehicle Voltron is still in the testing bay. I need someone to go to Doom and retrieve him." He paused. "I cannot afford failure."

"None of us can," Alexandra replied. "How was he captured?"

"No one seems to know the details. From all the intelligence I have received he was there, and then he wasn't."

"I see..." Alexandra nodded. "Keith is just like his father, reckless and daring. Anything could have happened to have thrown him in the situation he's currently in."

"It is a real pity he did not inherit your head, my sister." Graham sounded sad. "He would have made a much better soldier."

Alexandra shrugged. "I will depart at six hundred hours. I'll be taking Excalibur with me."

Graham nodded at the choice of the ship. "Very well. And please, be very careful. I'll send you as much information as I have gathered."

"Your Excellency."

Zheppo looked up and regarded the purple-haired woman in the vid screen. "Queen Merla, it's a pleasure to see you again. It's been a long time."

Merla nodded slowly. "My General has informed me of what has occurred in the Empire recently. I ask you why I was not informed."

"Queen Merla, surely you do not expect me to run over to Furie every time something transpires. I'm not your messenger boy. It's your duty, as Queen and a member of the Empire to keep yourself updated with events as they happen."

"Member of the Empire?" Merla arched an eyebrow.

Zheppo narrowed his eyes. "You're in the Dark Ring, are you not? I have chosen to allow you to conduct your business as you wish, but don't fool yourself by thinking that Furie is independent from the rest of us. In fact, I even chose to overlook the fact that you took over Brethan without my consent, after all that has expired. You never did offer to help, and then you simply reaped the fruits of someone else's labours."

Merla smiled. "Well, Your Excellency, is it truly my fault that I chose to take advantage of a situation? I'm certain you would have done the same in my place."

"Perhaps. However, you're expected to answer to the Empire."

"And I assure you that I have. Since Brethan's annexation to Furie, my taxes have been raised and import and export has increased as well. I have been paying my dues to the Empire. I didn't simply take the spoils not expecting consequences."

"Then why the attack on Eighteen?"

"There was no attack." Her eyes flickered and Zheppo scowled, suddenly confused. "I sent Sincine to discover what Lotor was up to. I was not aware that he had been assassinated and a Viceroy placed there instead. As you're probably aware, Furie and Doom were always close. We had a strong alliance and Lotor was my betrothed... at least for a time. When I heard that the Princess of Arus had married the Captain of the Voltron Force, I simply wished to be able to finally unite with Lotor to seal our alliances."

"Pity... It backfired," Zheppo said sardonically, his head clearing.

“Unfortunately,” Merla replied unfazed, satisfied her Telepathy had worked. “I suppose I’ll have to visit the Viceroy and rework all of the trade details again.”

Zheppo looked thoughtful. “For you, Province Eighteen is nothing more than a matter of convenience,” he stated simply.

Merla shrugged. “It is strategically placed to serve as a good buffer for Furie in case of an attack. It has supplied me with a lot of nuclear armaments and our combined forces in the past have proven quite formidable. Eighteen has value for me.”

“Perhaps, if you still seek a union to seal your alliance to Eighteen, that is not such an impossibility.” Zheppo smiled.

Merla arched an eyebrow. “You propose I marry the Viceroy?”

“He’s the King of Arus after all. He’s not so beneath you, Queen Merla.”

“Keith Akira?!” Merla looked surprised.

“The very same. It seems that we have finally found a use for that annoying lout.” He regarded the Mischur woman carefully. “And that would probably eliminate any doubts in my mind that you may choose to move against me. If you seal a pact with Eighteen you’ll be marrying into the Empire. I regard Furie no more than an upstart planet at the moment.”

“So am I to become Nineteen?”

“Maybe...” Zheppo answered vaguely. “But these arrangements can be conducted later.”

Merla nodded. “I will go to Eighteen and speak with the Viceroy. Perhaps a new alliance can be formed without such a drastic measure.”

“Akira doesn’t appeal to you?” Zheppo leered.

“Quite the contrary. He is rather handsome. However, I was never much inclined towards his ideals.”

“He’s being retrained.”

“By Mauld, no less,” Merla stated.

She was well versed with the hybrid. He had spent some time on Furie receiving the Psionic training from her and Sincline at Bysmann’s request. He had proven to be rather weak; however, his ways were efficient enough to sometimes rival even Sincline, the strongest Mischur alive. Even with limited Power Wells, he had managed to learn the about the Forbidden and become quite adept at the art.

“Mauld has been placed on Eighteen temporarily. I don’t have anyone else to take this job.” Zheppo studied her. “I will tell him to expect your arrival.”

Zheppo shut off the transmission and stood. There was still the matter of an execution he had to perform. He smiled pleased. *At least Mauld is proving his worth. I’m sick of being surrounded by incompetents! And this human he’s elected seems eager to please me and seems quite a talented Condar player. Perhaps he will win the Queen over and eliminate all my problems.* He smiled lightly. *Wouldn’t that be wonderful... And who knows, perhaps he will even replace Mauld. That one worries me. He’s too exceptional for his own good.* He walked off to carry out the execution of the Voltron pilots.

“What do you want from me?” Allura demanded.

“Nothing yet, Your Majesty.” Mauld poured himself a glass of water. “I simply came to pay you a visit and see how you were doing.”

“How long am I to be kept here?”

Mauld shrugged. “As long as I have a use for you...” He drank slowly, watching her carefully. *You have a strange charm... I can understand why D’ssat and Akira have both fallen in love with you. Mayhap making you fall for me without deploying any Psionics might be more satisfying.* He smiled lightly. “My Queen, surely you do not expect me to simply let you go.”

“You’re a monster.” She picked up a lamp and hurled at Mauld.

Mauld halted the trajectory of the object and kept it still in the air. Allura’s hand went over her mouth involuntarily, her eyes wide, staring in shock at Mauld.

“W-what are you...?” she mumbled.

“I am a Psion; half Mischur to be exact.” He carried the lamp to another table with Telekinesis and sat it down gently. “Do not fret, however. I have no intentions of using my powers against you. You are my guest and will remain thus until I deem t’is time to release you to His Excellency for execution.”

Allura turned his back to him, afraid of unbidden tears emerging forth. She did not want him to see her crying. She took a deep breath, and was relieved when she did not lose

control over herself.

“Tell me... The others...”

“They were not found,” Mauld replied cleanly. “Mayhap if Abaddon had not gone down with Voltron, things would have turned out differently; howe’er, the two robots met a rather fatal end.”

Allura locked her jaw, determined not to cry. She had already come to that conclusion; however, she had hoped for the odds of them surviving. “So am I to join your harem?” she asked acidly, trying to push her grief away. *And it’s my fault, isn’t it? I was the one who brought them out here. Why didn’t I listen to Jeff...?*

“Harem?” Mauld laughed. “Luxury! I assure you that I am in no possession of such extravagance. I have other plans for you, My Queen.” He arched an eyebrow. “Although the idea of indulging in the carnal pleasures with you has made its way into my mind.”

“I assure you, seduction will not work.” She looked at him indifferently. “You are hardly my type, scrawny boy.”

“Scrawny boy?” Mauld laughed whole-heartedly. “I am happy to see that your fabled spirited temper is indeed real!” His eyes glittered in amusement. “My Queen, if you think that I will take you by violence, you are very mistaken. I do not enjoy... force.” He put his glass down. “Now for the matters at hand. Arus is without a ruler. Galaxy Garrison will probably move in and turn Arus into a military base like they have always wanted...”

“No!” Allura interrupted.

“Indeed. That would prove most catastrophic. That planet holds a magnificent beauty and t’would be a real pity to see missile silos instead of the lush, verdant forests.”

“What are you getting at?” Allura asked suspiciously.

“Your marriage to Akira is annulled. Howe’er, you are still the Queen of Arus. Your only set back at the moment is that you happen to be my captive and I assure you that I will not set you free so easily. Escape is also not an option.” He pointed to the bracelets around her wrists. “Those will work as a beacon for me. I will always know where you are. And despite the fact that t’will drain me for days, I will not hesitate to release my full power at you and kill you instantly.”

“What are you proposing, Mauld? Speak plainly.”

“His Excellency will agree to your release if he knows that you are under control. Mine or his, it matters not, since I am his to command. My proposition is that you marry me and then continue on your way... Of course, certain things will change.”

“Marry you?!” Allura exclaimed, astounded.

“A marriage of convenience. I know that you are familiar with those. After all, you never did allow your ex-husband to touch you.”

“How do you know this?” Allura demanded angrily.

“I know all I need to know. Rest assured that nothing is a secret if I do not wish it to be.” Mauld pulled a chair and sat on it backwards, placing his arms on the backrest. “Although I admit t that consummating a marriage is the most fun part of it all.”

“You’re sick!”

“No, I am quite healthy...” He blinked slowly, still very pleased at the situation. “Queen Allura, t’is your decision. Should you choose to refuse, you will be executed.”

“Wonderful options you’re presenting me with, Mauld... Thanks!”

Mauld bowed his head. “You are most welcome.”

Allura suppressed the urge to throw something else at him. “What will I have to do?”

“You will do naught. You will not move against the Empire or the Galaxy Alliance. Arus will simply be a blue orb floating in space with no purpose other than looking ornamental.”

“I don’t understand.”

“As it stands, Arus is the strongest planet in the Diamond Galaxy. If it remains uncommitted, the others will lose heart and the conquest will be much easier. So as you can see, by eliminating you, Arus fall, and with its fall, the Diamond Galaxy is gone.”

“You forget Garrison. If I fall, they will take over Arus.”

“And tell me, who do you think will follow those goons? Arus is known for its beauty and strength. They will not follow an ugly planet, a planet which will be corrupted by the military. Also, on the day of your execution, planet bombs will be sent to wipe Arus from the universal map. The Empire will not allow Garrison to move in. The Empire does not want such a threat. Tis not needed. Everything is stable and going according to plans.”

“You wouldn’t be so cruel...”

“Ahm...” Mauld smirked. “Would I not?”

Allura rolled her eyes. "Sorry, I forgot I was talking to scum."

"Correct. At any rate, the final choice is yours, My Queen. Arus can live on, its people happy and un-enslaved, or it can all be destroyed."

"But if you put me back on the throne, Arus will be restored," she countered.

"Yes. The planet will be safe. Its people will continue to live under your dominion. However, by not taking part in the war, you will lower the Diamond Galaxy's morale. They will be more hesitant about fighting if their strongest planet is not engaging the enemy."

"So you want me to sit back and just watch everything?"

"Basically. You will be assigned your missions, but I assure you that none will involve you moving against anyone." Mauld cocked his head. "The purpose of this exercise is to simply weaken the others by using more subtle methods. His Excellency would rather move and start the war. I find that wasteful in both lives and armaments. I would rather conquer everything more amicably."

"Mauld! That's insanity! Do you really think you can move against a whole galaxy in a casual stroll and expect them to simply surrender to you?"

He shrugged. "I know not. I have ne'er tried." Mauld smiled, amused. "This shall be the test."

Allura sighed. "So your plan is to marry me, become King of Arus, and make me into nothing more than a babysitter for my people."

"Your job is to assure their survival. I have no plans for them. Arus also holds no financial importance, since it can produce naught in mass quantity for export. All 'tis a tourist attraction and a resort."

"Then why do you want to keep it?" Allura asked, perplexed by the logic.

"Because I do not want to see it destroyed," Mauld said as if he was stating the obvious. "No man is an Iland, intire of itselfe, everyman is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine... any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore ne'er send to know for whom the bell tolls..."

Allura sat down, afraid of her knees giving out from under her. Mauld was providing her with a glimpse of the man she had suspected existed under the Drule façade. She had certainly never expected him to show any humane feelings towards anyone else. Yet, she could almost sense the same internal struggle she had so often witnessed in Lotor. The two hybrid men were torn by the desire of living in peace, according to the decree of one half, and responding to the most primeval, destructive instincts by the other. They were condemned to live with entropy and sanctity churning together, and yet never mixing to achieve a perpetual balance.

"Mauld... I need time to think... I can't... You can't expect me to..."

Mauld stood and went to her. He knelt in front of her and smiled softly. "Of course. I did not anticipate an answer right away. Be assured that you are safe whilst you are here. No one will touch you and no one can do anything to Arus either. I have spoken with Space Marshal Graham and he knows that you are alive and well."

Allura looked enthralled by the eyes, though Mauld was exercising no power. Their distinct quality was enough. "I'm tired..."

"Yes. The past few days have been very trying on you and you are grieving the loss of your friends." He stood up and extended his hand to her. "Come, rest."

Allura took the offered hand mechanically and Mauld led her to the bed. He placed her gently down and covered her.

"Sleep, beautiful one. I will come to see you again at a later hour." He turned the light off and walked out.

"Viceroy, I see you are feeling better." Mauld leaned against a wall and crossed his ankles and his arms. "Are you ready to commence your rulership?"

Keith looked at him casually and continued strapping on the intricate uniform. "Yes. I'm getting really bored lying on this bed all day."

"Understandable." Mauld smiled and waited to escort Keith out.

"Tell me, Mauld, how's the mining for the metal coming along?" Keith asked. "I know it has fantastic properties and it would be imperative in the production of new ships for the Doom guerrilla."

"Hum... I am afraid that is quite lost, Viceroy. T' was a well kept secret and with King Lotor's death, I do not believe that we may e'er find it."

"It's in the planet," Keith stated flatly. "How can it not be found?"

Mauld shrugged. “So far, every expedition has met with failure. I have detached the most expert geologists and none have found it. T’is almost as if King D’ssat did not lie and the metal was indeed imported.”

“Oh...” Keith looked at the papers on the desk. “How is His Excellency taking the news?”

“He is not pleased. Howe’er, I warned him that it was but a supposition on my part and that I would pressure King D’ssat to tell me. He agreed to my threats, howe’er, circumstances impeded me from extracting the information from him sooner.”

“Circumstances?”

“Viceroy, I am only one man. I cannot be everywhere at once. I am at His Excellency’s beck and call constantly. I am certain you can understand my limitations.”

“And that is why it’s so imperative that Eighteen has its own Viceroy,” Keith concluded.

“Aye. A Viceroy who is strong and a leader.”

“And Voltron?”

“Has become scrap.”

Mauld felt something tug in his mind and realised that Keith’s true essence was struggling against the news. He locked his jaw and allowed Keith to sort things out alone. *I cannot keep applying power to you. I need to assure that whate’er you already have of me taints and poisons your mind.* He narrowed his eyes. *Escape me not I know that deep down you do wish to be your own man, that you are quite tired of being a puppet.*

“Did anyone...?” Keith left the question unfinished.

“I am afraid not.” Mauld cocked his head. *I do so hope that I have you under my command.* He sent a tendril of Empathy towards Keith. *Now let us see how you react.* “Whereas they did survive the crash, they were executed by His Excellency.”

Shock.

That was the primary emotion Mauld received. He blinked in a calculative manner and continued to study Keith. Primordial emotions fought against the hold the Psionic powers had on him, but the latter stifled his thoughts, taking command of his being. Keith shook his head in confusion, not understanding what he should feel or why. He recollected the Voltron pilots being his friends, especially Lance and Sven. However, their deaths seemed no more than another technicality he had to deal with.

Everyone dies eventually, something told him. Grief is a fool’s excuse to shirk his responsibility.

Keith almost nodded at the thought. *I’ve always had everything I wanted. Why should I care about this?* He looked at Mauld who looked pleased. “Lead the way, Admiral.”

Oh good, you are realising that your past is gone. Except, of course, for what I want you to remember. Mauld smiled subtly. *I do envy you... A pampered and spoiled brat, parents who adored you, elder siblings who looked after you and cared for you... My, Viceroy, your life has been commendable.* Mauld pushed himself from the wall. “Come... Space Marshal Graham wishes to speak with you.”

Keith nodded and followed Mauld. They entered the control room in the castle and the officers and workers snapped to attention upon seeing Keith and Mauld. They bowed curtly before returning to their duties. Keith smiled lightly, rather pleased by this show.

Yes, present me with the respect I merit. I am your ruler. Keith felt almost as if his mind was two independent entities, and the one in the forefront, the new Keith, was pushing the main into a chasm in his subconscious. The entity in the fore was a combination of all the emotions Keith had been forced to suppress his whole life in order to be a functional member of the human society.

“Contact Galaxy Garrison,” Keith commanded.

The Chief of the Communication Unit followed the order immediately. Mauld moved fluidly and blended with the shadows. Space Marshal Graham’s face came alive on the screen and Keith regarded him carefully as if he was a long lost enemy. He recognised the man, but he also saw him as someone who had always had ordered him about and never given him time to do anything on his own.

I was no more than a well-trained dog for you, weren’t I, uncle? You, mother and father... You never allowed me to be myself. He glanced at Mauld briefly. *But that’s all changed.*

“Keith!” Graham nearly jumped out of his chair. “My boy, how are you?”

“I am not your boy, Marshal. I am Viceroy Akira of Province Eighteen. I would appreciate respect.” Keith crossed his arms.

Graham regarded him warily. “Very well, Viceroy, what I wish to know is what you are doing on Doom.”

“This is my Province.” Keith smirked. “Oh, and it’s Eighteen, not Doom. I hope that’s not too complicated for you to grasp. I received the message that you wished to speak with me. I’m listening.”

“Keith! What is going on?!” Graham demanded furiously. “You were reported missing and now you’re the Viceroy of Eighteen. Not only that, but you assassinated Lotor! Did you order Voltron to be destroyed too?”

Keith arched an indifferent eyebrow. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t. But don’t you worry. I’ll be ordering the next attack. Be assured that you’ll not forget my name any time soon.”

“Well, you were well trained!” Graham snapped.

“Of course I was. I was nothing but a Doberman for you and my parents. Well, it’s over now. I’m sick of it.” Keith blinked languidly. “And do me a favour, will you? Don’t call me.” He made a sign for the transmission to be turned off.

In the shadows Mauld laughed to himself. *If His Excellency saw this, I would be castigated until I died!* His eyes flickered. *This is going better than I had expected. This human is taking full control of Eighteen and he may even refuse His Excellency’s orders if they clash with his own ideas... I love life!*

“You wanted to see me, Admiral?”

Mauld studied the black haired woman in front of him. “Yes. There is a Game.”

Dorma cocked her head. “Indeed? Am I taking orders from you now? I thought only His Excellency could deploy the Rooks.”

“I am his spokesman, Rook Morphay. I have his orders to command your mission.”

“My, my, Mauld. You’re a sucker for titles.” Dorma looked amused at him. “My name’s Dorma. Plain and simple.”

“Very well, Dorma Plain And Simple, your job...”

“You’re not funny,” s he stated flatly.

“I know.” Mauld shrugged. “Dorma Dorma, you are to Remove Sincline from the board.”

“General Sincline from Furie?”

“Now who likes titles?” Mauld’s eyes sparkled.

“I recommend you abort your Psionic attack, Mauld. It won’t work on me” She raised her hand, exposing a plain looking ring. “I am prepared to face just about anything.”

Mauld nodded, impressed. “Remarkable. Tis little wonder that you were made a Rook, given that you are a female and all.”

“You don’t know that either,” Dorma replied enigmatically. “No matter. I will take the job under one condition.” She narrowed her eyes. “Where are my brothers?”

“They are still recovering. They suffered quite grievous wounds, King D’ssat especially. Rest assured that they will be sent to the Fortress upon their recovery.”

Dorma pushed her dyed black hair back. “Why don’t you Play the Game, Mauld? I know you’re a Bishop, and quite a good one at that. Why do you give me the honour of this Game?”

“Because I do not have the time, Madam.” Mauld arched an eyebrow.

“What about the blue-eyed vixen?” Dorma asked casually.

“She cannot be sent out without supervision. If I deploy her, everyone in her path will be killed. She is too unpredictable and quite insane.” Mauld paused. “Do you not want it? Or are you afraid?”

Dorma laughed. “This kind of goading doesn’t work, Mauld. I’m not a foolish boy who will take on foolish dares to appease his foolish friends.” She crossed her arms. The low cut tunic she wore gave Mauld quite a bit of food for thought, principally when her casual motion enhanced her chest. “The job is mine. When do you want Sincline Eliminated?”

“The morn after the wedding of the Queen of Furie and the Viceroy of Eighteen.”

“So the rumours are true.”

“For now anyway.” Mauld shrugged. “Things could always change.”

“And if they do?”

“I will keep you informed and update your mission.”

Dorma watched the male in front of her with amusement. “How long has it been, Mauld? You’re always so busy. Do you ever have time to enjoy life?” she asked bluntly, taking a step towards him. “Perhaps His Excellency demands too much from you.”

“Quite sometime...” he murmured.

Mauld eyes locked with her crimson orbs. He felt just as enthralled by her as she was by him. An image of the blue-eyed vixen flashed in his mind, and not for the first time, he resented her denial to be with him. Pushing the vulpine face away, he went towards Dorma and held her by the waist.

Dorma tilted her head back slightly to maintain eye contact “That’s a pity...” Her arms snaked around his shoulders, avoiding the sharp ailettes. “You look rather... tense.”

Mauld smiled. “There is always a price to pay when you choose a path in life. Mine is to be cursed with no time to enjoy my own. Yours is to always expect a dagger on your back...” He brushed his lips against hers. “And speaking of which, put that dagger away, Dorma. You are to kill Sincline, not me.” He kissed her deeply.

The dagger vanished from Dorma’s hand as efficiently as it had appeared. She had done that no more than to test him. She pulled Mauld closer to herself and responded to the kiss wholeheartedly.

Hazar, if you only knew... You would kill me! she thought amused. “You’re very trusting...” Dorma whispered as they broke the kiss.

Mauld laughed, and nuzzled her neck. “My dear Dorma, I trust no one... Not even myself.”

“So you see through this seduction?”

He focused on her red eyes. “Yes... I see the seduction for what t’is.”

“This does not bother you?”

“Like you, I am lonely. We will share a bed and we will part our ways in the morn.” He shrugged. “Neither one of us can afford to feel for another. Your lover today can become your target in the next dawn.” He led her to his chamber. *And the more you love someone, the more they push you away.*

“You’re totally out of your mind!” Hazar declared.

Lotor regarded him briefly. “You’ve already pointed that out in numerous occasions.” He paused thoughtfully. “I’m starting to believe you.”

“This is no joking matter!” Hazar said, frustrated.

“Lay off it.” Lotor waved a dismissing hand.

“You’re going along with Mauld’s plan. It’s complete insanity! I mean, this is certified, put-on-your-wall-plaque kind of certification we’re talking here!”

“Would you like a plaque too?” Lotor smirked.

Hazar stared flatly at him. “Why is it that I always get sucked down the road of sin with you? Lotor, this is madness! Insanity! Do you know what those words mean? Have you learned the meaning of the word fear yet?”

A pillow went flying across the room hitting Hazar on the head. “If you two must bicker like two grannies, at least be quiet about it...” Lance found another pillow and let out a content moan as he made himself comfortable on his bed.

Lotor looked blankly at Hazar, disregarding Lance. “Fear? No, I’m afraid not.” He cocked his head, amused at his own jest. “Surely you’re not afraid. You can’t be. You hang out with me.”

Hazar threw his arms up in the air. “Why? Why do I follow you? Why do I put myself through this?” he demanded from no one in particular.

“Because you’re stupid?” Lance offered.

“Because your life would be dreadfully boring otherwise,” Lotor responded simultaneously.

“Grant me strength.” Hazar groaned. “I think I’m going to join a religious sect so that I can learn how to pray. It would certainly be very convenient right now. Lotor, we’re not twelve anymore! The penalties are not as we once knew. Why can’t you understand that?”

Lotor regarded him. “I see Mauld has not taken complete control over you, brother mine. I’m happy to see that. And now we’ll find autonomy. I still have Rue and my blades...” He scowled. “If I can repair Rue that is.”

“Oh you’ll repair her all right.” Hazar rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know what’s more frustrating, seeing my life flash before my eyes or knowing that it’s my own stupid fault for prompting it.”

“Are there commercials or reruns? I’ve always been curious.” Lance sat up on the bed, giving up his attempt to sleep.

Hazar looked thoughtful. “Well, it’s all relative. I suppose if your life was boring...”

“You don’t have to follow me.” Lotor flapped his arms in the air, annoyed at the redundant turn the conversation had taken.

“Of course I do. What else do I have to do?”

“Then quit the belly aching!”

“Hey, buster, if you’re allowed to get me killed, then I’m allowed to complain.”

“I never got you killed!” Lotor protested.

“And this last occurrence?” Hazar looked flatly at him. “Let me guess... an eventful picnic?”

“Well, okay. That was no walk in the park, but that was your own stupid fault for following me. I told you to stay here.”

Hazar sighed. “Fine! Now, please, just this once, tell me you’re not gonna go through with Mauld’s plan. What he’s proposing is ludicrous!”

“Do you two always argue like this?” Lance asked, confused.

“Oh, this is really nothing. Wait till we get better,” Hazar informed him.

“Why?” Lotor questioned. “Hazar, we have to get out of here. Mauld is offering us the tickets. Why would I refuse them? You know well enough that we were going to run away anyway. This is just going to facilitate our plans.”

“Why is Mauld helping us?!” Hazar demanded. “Think for a moment, numbskull. What does Mauld get out of this? He has admitted that he only does things which will benefit him. How’s our escape beneficial to him? Or is it something that happens during our escape that will be advantageous for him? And what happens when Zheppo finds out that we’re actually alive? How’s Mauld getting out of that one?”

Lotor looked thoughtful. “I have asked myself the same questions. I don’t understand it, either. He’s very careful with what he discloses. Keith believes he has killed us. Mauld went on with the idea. I don’t know what else he has done or said. I can’t answer you.”

“Lotor, maybe Mauld is biting off more than he can chew. And if that’s the case, then we’re getting into more trouble than we’ll know how to get out of.” Hazar paused. “How did he know where we were anyway? It’s not like we radioed in.”

“No. I believe he used some sort of Psionic scan to detect us, or life forms in general. He was probably looking for the other pilots and found us as a bonus. Mauld is very alert to what’s going on around him.”

Lance got up from his bed and retrieved his pillow, since it was making no moves to go back to him. “You know, my only question is: why am I here? It’s easy to take things in stride like I’ve been, but I am very worried about the others... if they survived at all.”

Lotor studied him. “So far, I’ve gathered from Mauld that the others endured the crash and Allura is being kept captive by Zheppo. Keith is ruling in my place, which is fine by me, and no one knows I’m alive. My plan is then to save Allura from Zheppo as soon as we are released.”

“Are you hoping she’ll accept you now?” Lance leered.

“Oh, shut up. You can be just as annoying as that twerp of a Captain.” Lotor rolled his eyes. “Listen, freaky, I will save Allura because I love her and not because I’m trying to get up her skirt. If you have forgotten, allow me to remind you that I was the one who broke up with her.”

Lance sighed. “Lotor, ever thought of escaping here?”

Lotor looked at the seamless steel door of their room and back at Lance. “Be my guest, Lance. And if you hit your head again, I’m not buzzing the nurse.”

Lance huffed. “You know, I’m not the weakling you believe I am. Just because I’m not some troglodyte like you...”

“Troglodyte?” Hazar interrupted. “What are you talking about? He’s a runt.”

“What?!” Lance asked in shock.

“Oops!”

Lotor just stared at Hazar with his mouth agape, his chin in the vicinity of his feet.

“Well, it’s true...” Hazar shrugged, realising his mistake too late. “I mean for a Doomite and all... You’re not as big as the others... But for a human, you’re big and stuff... Oh, dear...” Hazar hung his head in misery. “Anyone have a shovel? I’ll just start digging my tombright now.”

Lance finally burst into an uproarious laughter. He tried to say something, but he could do nothing else other than just stare at Lotor’s shocked face, point, make incoherent noises and laugh all the louder. He held on to his ribs against the cramps he began to feel as his face turned a bright crimson and he kicked down on his bed, trying to regain control.

“Now you’ve done it.” Lotor finally recovered.

"It was an accident. Honestly." Hazar turned his back to the room. "I'm just going to take a nap for a couple of hours now. I would like to be well rested before I go to sleep in a few hours."

"Hazar..." Lotor called with a throaty growl.

"Mea Culpa!" Hazar sat up, legs crossed in front of him on the bed. "Sue me!"

"No... I'm going to kill you." Lotor leapt up and dove onto Hazar.

Lance recovered sufficiently at this turn of events. "Oh, break it up, you two. It looks like you're in love. What next? Kiss and make up?"

Hazar was about to reply sagaciously when Lotor silenced him with a well-placed punch on the jaw. Hazar grunted and brought his knee up knocking the wind out of Lotor as it connected with his ribs. Lance threw his hands up in the air and sat up, watching the two men fight. Suddenly the door opened and Mauld walked in. He looked at the tangled mess on the bed and at Lance before sitting on Lotor's bed. He took out chocolate bars out of his pocket and tossed one to Lance.

"Why are they fighting now?" Mauld finally asked.

Wisely, Lance did not disclose the reason. "Oh you know... Kids." He shook his head.

Lotor was hurled from the bed and landed with a loud "oomph" on his back. That's when he noticed that Mauld was in the room. He stood up with all the dignity he could muster, gave Lance a warning glare and crossed his arms.

"Fancy meeting you here... What do you want?" he demanded.

"Preparations have been made. The fuselage of Rue and Voltron are aboard a ship and you are being now moved to the Fortress," Mauld explained.

Lotor walked over and plucked the chocolate bar from him. "When are we leaving?"

"In about four days. No one is to know that you are here. And no one is to see you leave. In four days an event will take place where everyone will be distracted and that is when I plan to send you off." He looked at Lance. "Oh, and you are going with them. You will serve a better purpose at the Fortress."

"What?!" Lance exclaimed in disbelief.

"Mauld, however do you expect to cover this one up?" Lotor bit thoughtfully into the chocolate bar. "I mean... Everyone thinks we're dead! We're just going to pop up all of a sudden?"

Mauld shrugged. "That matter does not concern me. I simply went with the information given me by the Viceroy. If he failed to kill you, then..."

"Bodies! Were you never asked about our bodies?"

"Nay." Mauld arched an eyebrow. "And since no one asked I ne'er looked for them."

"Keith will be executed!" Lance snapped.

"No, he will not. The mistake was mine for not checking out his information in depth." Mauld cocked his head. "Besides, why would anyone be killed? His Excellency has everyone placed on the board as he wishes. To eliminate anyone now would be foolish."

"Even us?" Lotor raised an eyebrow. "We're not exactly big shots on his hit parade."

Mauld shrugged again. "That is no concern of mine."

"What's the purpose of keeping us alive, Mauld? At least tell me that. You're risking far too much. And I mean your own skin. I know you're an opportunist, but you like to play safe."

"I also love a good game of intrigue." He stood up and took the rest of the chocolate back from Lotor. "And Keeper D'ssat of Hansbach, you are granting me the grandest game of all time."

"What of Allura?" Lotor demanded.

"She is still safe. Arrangements are also being made for her safe transport back to Arus." Mauld looked at Lance. "When you reach the Fortress, remain there," he warned. "If anyone goes back to Arus, t'will mean the start of the war. His Excellency is pleased by the course of things. And I assure you t'was no easy task to place everything as it is. In fact, I would even recommend you all stay very still and quiet until the attacks commence. Build your forces." He looked meaningfully at Lotor. "I know that you can outfit the men with the Dirges. Train them well. You will need every one of them."

"Mauld..."

He raised his hand. "I will not supply you with any more information, Keeper. I bid you goodbye." He left the room.

"Cocky little..." Lance bit off the rest of the sentence.

"Dolt?" Hazar offered.

“That works.” Lance looked at Lotor. “Now what?”

“It’s going to be a long four days...” He sighed loudly and pulled out a deck of cards.

Keith looked up as he heard the door open. Mauld walked in and stood to the side, in a formal salute. Keith stood up and ran a hand over his hair; if he was trying to fix it or mess it up will remain a mystery, since the locks sprang right back to their original position.

“Viceroy Akira, I announce Queen Merla of Furie.” Mauld bowed his head lightly.

Keith had met Merla in the past and he had considered her almost exotic. However, as she entered his study wearing a formal dress and her hair pinned up instead of braided, Keith did everything in his power not to gape. Her garb’s colour matched her hair, though Keith’s eyes only vaguely recorded this information. They remained set on the front where the low cut of the corset hid only enough to send his imagination into overload.

“Queen Merla.” Keith bowed before her.

“Viceroy Akira, there is really no need for formalities...” She looked languidly at Mauld, who gave her a curt bow and vacated the room. “I have come here to have an amicable chat with you and perhaps re-establish anything you might feel is not in order.”

Keith was almost disappointed. His mind reeled with thoughts of Allura; however, he could not stop looking at the Mischur woman in front of him. Merla possessed none of the naïveté or innocence that Allura often displayed. She was sultry, self-assured and a hunter. Keith, although he had always admired Merla from a distance, had chosen to keep matters as they were. He almost feared the woman before him.

“Is there something you’re not happy with?” Keith pulled out a chair for her. “Are the treaties not agreeable to you any longer, My Queen?”

“Please... Dispense with the formalities.” She sat down. “My name is Merla.”

Keith swallowed as his eyes scanned the mountainous landscape before him. Standing over Merla gave him an unobstructed view of all that she had to offer.

“As you wish, Merla...” He moved away, pouring wine for them.

“As for the treaties, I am quite happy with them. My question is: are you?”

Keith handed her a goblet. “Nothing pleases me more than seeing you happy.” *Where the heck did this come from?! Keith asked himself shocked.*

“I must commend you, Viceroy. You have been the most pleasant ruler this planet’s ever had.” Merla sipped her wine slowly, seductively.

“Merla, please, call me Keith.”

She smiled almost predatorily. “My apologies, Keith... Such a lovely name. I must say that humans have good taste in naming their children.”

Keith sat down across from her. “Merla, I don’t think you came here to discuss human behaviour... And if you did, I would rather not... there are other things that sound far more appealing to me.”

“Like what, Keith?” She looked coyly at him.

“Like the treaty between Eighteen and Furie.” He smiled.

Mauld had briefed him that it was the Emperor’s wish to gain control over Furie regardless of the cost. With Furie’s annexation to the Empire, they would gain Brethan as well, which was, in itself, a powerful military base populated by nothing but warriors. Furie was also a threat to the Empire since it had never sworn itself completely to the Emperor and had but a shaky alliance. Mainly, Zheppo did not like the idea of a woman sitting on the throne. Keith found that he could not disagree with the notion.

If they are allowed an ounce of power, it goes right to their heads... Look at Arus’ example...

Keith was to gain Merla’s trust and as much of her good will as possible. Once she allied herself to Eighteen, this being part of the Empire, she would be consequentially forced to answer to the Emperor. Keith had liked the plan. Power was an addictive drug that he was consuming with great ardour. His plan was to make Eighteen the most powerful of all Provinces of the Dark Empire and then replace Mauld as the Emperor’s Admiral.

“Is there anything you wish changed?” Merla arched an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Keith stood up. “But it has very little political relevance. I suppose it will at some point, but right now, it is a personal matter.”

Merla studied Keith carefully and then sent a tendril of Telepathic power into him and began to examine his thoughts. *So you have been tampered with... I don’t have to probe further to know that it was Mauld. I’m certain the signature would be his.* She paused, her eyes travelling the length of Keith as she read his mind. *But you do speak truly. Who would*

have guessed, Keith? You were actually attracted to me. I thought you hated me, to say the least. And now you want to pursue something you were denied for a long time. She flinched as she travelled deeper. *I see... Mauld, you learned well. Setting snares in his mind to keep another Psion from taking him over was quite wise. But what secret are you hiding, I wonder?*

"You wish for a union then," Merla stated.

"Perhaps... We've only but met," Keith murmured. "I won't assume that you would be interested in me, Merla. I know I'm not exactly your type."

Merla laughed. "Then tell me, what is my type?"

"Over developed blueberries with long white hair?" Keith smirked.

"Hardly." She looked very amused. "Keith, I have always been partial to dark hair and eyes... Interesting enough, you have both."

He took her hands and brought her up to her feet. "Indeed?"

She caressed his arms. "Yes..."

"Did you plan this too?" Sinceline asked.

"Give me credit," Mauld answered. "What do you think I am? Eros, the match maker?"

The two men stood across from each other, some distance away from Keith's study. They could pass almost as a reflection of one another, with their arms folded over their chest, legs crossed at the ankles and leaning against the wall. Sinceline was, however, bigger and his face was stoic, holding none of the delicateness and amusement that was Mauld's wont.

"I hate your insipid humour," Sinceline snapped.

"You just hate me." Mauld grinned.

"Don't be so smug, runt. Nothing would please me more than killing you."

"Oh stifle yourself, Sinceline." Mauld yawned. "Look, we were both a pain to each other when I was growing up. You hate me because I am sneaky and I hate you because you are mean." Mauld paused. "Did you have to hit me so many times? T'is not like I killed your pet or anything."

"You did worse. You were born," Sinceline rebuked.

"Like that is my fault..." Mauld cocked his head. "You know what your problem is, Sinceline? You are too bitter about things. I think working with the Forbidden rattled your brains a little too much. Mayhap you should relax and smell the roses more oft... they do possess a lovely fragrance..." He smiled suddenly, his eyes sparkling with unhidden merriment. "I know! You are jealous!" Mauld taunted.

"What?" Sinceline scowled confused.

"You are jealous of the Queen." Mauld looked innocent. "I mean, we both know what they are doing in there. And you are just jealous because someone is not only touching your Queen, but also the woman you desire."

"Don't be absurd!" Sinceline snapped.

"Absurd? Nay. Methinks I hit the nail dead-on. Worry not, General. The Queen would have ne'er granted you the chance to be more than you are." *You and I are so alike. Even in love we are both scorned.*

"What do you speak of?"

Mauld shrugged. "Naught I suppose... What was it that you used to say?" He looked thoughtful. "I spin yarns? Aye, methinks that is correct."

"You spin webs; webs upon webs of intrigues, Mauld. I just wonder when you'll be caught in your own game. I just hope to be around. It'll probably be a barrel of laughs."

"I hope you are around too, Sinceline. If my death will at least make you smile, then t'will not be for naught, my old friend." Mauld pushed himself off the wall with a smirk. "Do not grace me with that scowl. Did your mother not tell you your face might stick that way?" He left laughing at Sinceline's angry look.

Keith sat in the functionally furnished room, about to bring a cup of coffee to his lips, when the alarms suddenly commenced to blare. He rolled his eyes and looked at Mauld, who was sitting at the control panels.

"What is it?"

Mauld laughed. "Alliance ships. There is a fleet of them and they are deploying fighters. Those fools are courting death."

Keith, intrigued by the announcement, stood and approached the console. The radar showed a flotilla of seven carriers, nine destroyers and the mothership Excalibur. The latter

was the flagship of the Alliance armada in both power and manoeuvrability. After small jet fighters left the carriers and assembled into attack formation in front of the convoy, the carriers' runways rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, and exposed the hidden cannons on the underside.

"Those are Snipers," Keith explained, referring to the fighters. "They are the Alliance's latest toys. They are known for speed and deadly accuracy. Despite their size, they carry amazing fire power." He cocked his head. "I think I'll test Phantom against them."

"The modifications you requested are not yet completed," Mauld reminded him.

"I'll take her out anyway," Keith shrugged. "She should perform adequately and it will be a good test to see how things are coming so far."

Keith reached the battlefield ahead of the Nephillim and the other Doom battleships. Fury was still being powered up by the time he had reached Phantom. He smiled grimly. *Good. I hate crowds.*

Although fast, the Snipers were not as well manned as Phantom. The craft swooped in their midst dodging every single hit and scoring a few of its own. Keith worked the control with relaxed competence. The Snipers meant nothing to him. They were simply dust motes in space.

His moves were daring but precise. Every single motion of the craft was carefully noted and adjusted or re-measured. He did not fail to see how much better the jet was responding since the alterations had started. Phantom's aerodynamics had increased a tenfold.

And I suppose I have you to thank for, Lotor. After all, I did steal a lot of Rue's concepts. I still find it very unfair that you, of all people, had such a craft. A real pity you scraped it.

Again, Phantom flew in and out of the enemies' midst. The Snipers scrambled to get a clear shot at the fighter, but had to hold their fire due to the proximity of their sister ships.

He was about to launch his attack when his screen came on.

"Stop this nonsense."

Keith blinked slowly. "Mother? What are you doing so far from home?"

"I came to get you, you little ingrate. What do you think you're doing? Why did you allow this corruption to take over you?" Alexandra graced him with a stern look.

"What? Are you resentful that I achieved glory before you?" Keith sneered. "I'm sorry, mother, if I ascended faster than you."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes, not liking the changes that had overcome her son. "Don't be foolish, Keith. Nothing would please me more to see you in power. In fact, I was very pleased when I heard that you were married to the Queen of Arus."

"Of course you were. I was under her control. That woman didn't even acknowledge my existence! I was just a convenient tool for her. And you would approve of that, wouldn't you? I was still under someone's command, after all!"

"What has happened to you? What's the meaning of this? Do you even realise what you are saying?"

"I know well enough what I'm saying. I will give you a chance to retreat from my airspace. If you refuse, I will destroy every single one of your ships." Keith smiled in an eldritch manner as the Nephillim reached the battlefield. "And don't doubt my words for a moment... mother."

Alexandra locked her jaw. "Attack formation. Shoot to kill!" she commanded.

"The original plan has been aborted. You leave now," Mauld announced as he swept into the room. His face was, for a change, serious. "Look smart, men! Failure is not an option."

Lotor, Hazar and Lance exchanged brief glances, jumped up and saluted. "Aye, aye, sir!" they said together.

"I am happy to see that you have bonded. Now move!" Mauld commanded.

The three followed Mauld out. They reached the hangars and boarded a battleship, which stood beside Fury. It was about half of the size of the dreadnaught, but looked sturdy enough to carry them and their cargo to the Fortress.

"What's happening, Mauld? What's prompted this?"

"The Viceroy's mother is here." Mauld blinked in disbelief. "No one can catch her. I have been summoned to the battle and I figured I would take advantage of this distraction to dispatch you first... Godspeed."

“His mother?!” Hazar asked incredulously.

“Aw...” Lotor mocked. “Keithie’s in trouble and his mommy’s gonna spank his bum!”

Hazar snickered, trying not to laugh.

“That’s someone you do not want to tangle with.” Lance shook his head emphatically.

“She’s mean!”

“All the reports thus far show that you are right, Deputy Captain.” Mauld sighed. “Will you board that bloody craft and get the heck out of here already?!”

“Oh my! Mauld is upset” Hazar faked a look of panic. “Quick! Look outside, is there a moon outside or any other environmental abnormality happening?”

Mauld couldn’t help the smile that crept over his lips. “Well done, General. I knew I would count on you for some cheering up. Now move!”

The three boarded the craft and began to make preparations as Mauld went to Fury, which was already charged up and ready to go. Being smaller than Fury, their craft quickly gained altitude and left the dreadnaught far behind. They sped along and were about to jump into a warp when something hit them from behind, disrupting the warp sequence.

“What the...?” Hazar slammed down on the commands, shutting down the engines before they caught on fire. “Who or what hit us?”

Lotor’s hands danced over the controls. “The radar is showing several small crafts. They are buzzing us.”

“Snipers,” Lance offered. “I would shoot them down for you, but they are part of Garrison.”

“What’s your point?” Lotor demanded.

“They are my allies.”

Before either Hazar or Lotor could react, Lance grabbed the radio controls. “Keith! Admiral Førstenheüser! It’s me, Lance! Help! Hazar and Lotor are trying to escape.”

Hazar dove at Lance and the two fell away from the controls with a loud crash. Lotor cursed fluently and suddenly went rigid with shock from the name he had just heard.

Mauld slumped and rested his forehead on his crossed arms on the console in front of him. *They could not control one simple human... Why do I insist?*

“Lotor!” Keith’s voice suddenly filled the bridge. “You’re alive!”

“You missed me, you idiot” Lotor snapped mechanically, as all emotion drained from him. His sharp nails dug into the metal of the console before him, breaking against the unyielding metal.

“Well, I’ll make sure that I hit you this time,” Keith snarled.

“Admiral...?” Lotor called quietly, almost afraid.

Alexandra’s face came on the screen. “If it isn’t the former Prince of Doom. You don’t look as magnificent as I thought you would.”

Lotor stared at the platinum blonde woman in front of him in complete bewilderment, bordering on raw terror. He swallowed, taking in her features.

“What? Cat got your tongue?” she mocked.

“Lotor?” Lance asked cautiously, having untangled himself from Hazar.

“Mother...” Lotor mumbled and shook his head. “No! You can’t be! I saw you die!” He began to back away, his bloody fingers curling into fists. “Father killed you! I saw it!” He continued to shake his head wildly, refusing to accept the truth. “You...”

Alexandra looked very wary. “What are you talking about? I’m not your mother.”

Lotor’s breathing quickened and sweat poured down his face. He bumped against the far wall and remained still, his heart pounding.

“You died!” he suddenly screamed. “I saw you die! You died because of me! Because I wouldn’t listen! And I couldn’t save you at the end!” Tears fell unchecked from his eyes.

Alexandra knitted her brows, seeing the emotion displayed before her to be genuine. She swallowed tightly and tried to keep her hands from trembling. “Lotor, tell me, what is my name?”

Lotor swallowed some of his tears back. “Marian. Marian Førstenheüser. I would never forget your name, mother.”

Alexandra felt she had been dealt a forceful blow to her mid-section. She fell back in her chair, massaging her temples. “No, Lotor. I am not Marian. I am Alexandra. Your mother’s twin sister.” The overhead light reflected on the tears on her cheeks. “I never even knew she had had a child. I thought she had been destroyed when her mission failed.”

“What?” Lotor asked, confused, unable to grasp the events unfolding before him. The woman he believed to be his mother was not, and his mother had been on a mission? “But... Mother was not on a mission. She came to Doom to marry my father...” He shook his head,

realisation beginning to dawn on him. “Of course. It was all lies.”

“Yes. Your mother was the commander of an exploring mission. All communications were lost after a brief mayday, and later the rescue party found nothing but scrap from the ships. Very few bodies were recovered and my sister’s was one of the missing.” She studied Lotor briefly. “Ah, yes. I do see her cheekbones on you, Lotor.”

“Hold it a minute!” Keith suddenly exclaimed. “If you’re his aunt...”

Lotor felt like he had been drenched by an ice-cold bucket of water. He snapped out of his stupor and looked faint. “No...” He groaned tiredly. “No... Please don’t say...”

Hazar looked equivocally at him. “Say what? That you’re cousins?”

Mauld just laughed, though he kept his head down. *This is actually going much better than I planned. I do so like the cards fate deals me.*

Keith and Lotor looked at each other and turned away in disgust. They looked at Alexandra hopefully, as if begging her to say that she was but jesting regarding the events. Lotor was even willing to forsake this newly discovered tie to his past so that he could be rid of Keith.

“Must you twist the knife too?!” he demanded.

Hazar just shrugged. “I hate suspense.”

Lotor groaned. “Ahm... Aunt, I... when...” He shook his head. “I need time to think.” he said miserably. “I can’t...”

Hazar decided to solve the dilemma by throwing their ship into a cold warp.

Alexandra stared at the vacant space, previously occupied by the ship. She then turned to the other screen and looked at Keith. “You still haven’t answered me. Are you going to give up this foolishness and come home?”

Keith sneered. “Not in your life time.”

“You’re leaving me with little choice.”

“You deploy the Snipers, I’ll send the Nephillim. In the end, it’ll be your decision. I’m willing to call it a draw as it stands,” Keith said grudgingly; the discovery of a lost family member had upset his stability.

Alexandra nodded, emotionally exhausted by the recent occurrences. “I’ll return for you, Keith. Don’t you worry.” She called the Alliance forces back.

Mauld was about to enter Keith’s study when something snapped his attention into complete awareness. The fiasco of the battle had distracted him. Just then, he was trying to predict what answers Keith would be demanding from him. He was also cursing Sincline for being so correct in his prediction that Mauld’s own intrigues would get him killed.

He stopped and looked at the walls carefully before his gaze stopped at a specific spot. He moved towards it and ran his hand along the smooth surface until his fingers traced a thin fissure. He felt the crevice for a few moments and was not surprised when the wall fell back and he was faced with a black haired man, with mismatched eyes; one blue and the other black.

“Welcome to Province Eighteen.” Mauld’s eyes sparkled. “I hope you enjoy your stay, Knight Fennylaise Saint Lawrence.” He gave him an exaggerated bow, with a flourish of his cape. “What honour brings you by?”

Fenn cocked his head, his flawless brow knitting, not looking very happy about having been spotted. “Actually, I came here to kill you, Bishop Mauld Impruss. I hope it’s not too inconvenient.”

Mauld waved a dismissing hand. “Not at all.” He arched an amused eyebrow. “If you can, that is. I am afraid I will not co-operate.”

“Even if I ask nicely?”

“Even if you ask nicely.”

“Mauld, how is it that you always foil my bloody plans?” Fenn hopped out of the hole and put his hands on his hips. “You’ve wrecked every single one of my dates, you can drink more than I can and I swear that if I wasn’t so psychotic you would have probably possessed me with your psychosis by now.”

Mauld looked the picture of injured innocence. “Me? Wreck your plans? Tis not my fault you were scurrying in the wall making enough noise to wake up the dead.”

“Drules and their accursed acute senses!” Fenn swore. “Why can’t you people be normal?! I’m used to dealing with normal human beings. It’s a lot easier that way.”

“And this is coming from someone who is known as mutt of the universe?” Mauld arched an eyebrow.

“That’s pure bred mutt to you, pal,” Fenn corrected offhandedly. “Listen up, Mal, I’m going to kill you because if I don’t, you’re going to blow up my house. So could you just put this apple over you head...” He fumbled through his pockets and produced a fine specimen of the fruit in question. “Here we are then. We’ll play William Tell.”

“But that would involve you missing me,” Mauld reminded. “After all, you will have to hit the apple above my head.”

“Heck! Heck! Heck!” Fenn looked upset, but cheered almost immediately, snapping his fingers. “Got it! Bite into the apple and stand over there.”

“That is better.” Mauld smiled and stood against the wall. “Ready when you are.” He bit into the fruit and held it in his mouth.

“A co-operative target. Oh good! I hate to break a sweat.” Fenn pulled out his gun, aimed and fired.

To his surprise, the bullet travelled towards Mauld, seemed to hit a shield and ricocheted off down the hall, imbedding itself in a wall. He looked back at Mauld.

“That wasn’t fair!” Fenn flapped his arms. “You did that on purpose.”

Mauld bit off the piece of the apple and held it casually on one hand. “Do you really think I would allow a fool Knight to eliminate me so easily? Saint Lawrence, you should know me a little better by now.” He shrugged. “I am afraid, however, that I will have to cut this interview short. The Viceroy urgently requires my presence.”

Fenn shot Mauld again, only to have the same effect once more. Mauld tried not to flinch as the impact of the bullets hitting his Kinetic Shield sent ripples of pain through his mind. He could see the purple aura around him bending under each bullet. Fenn sighed deeply, threw the gun to the floor and stomped on it before finally kicking it away.

“No matter. I don’t think you can stand against my baby.” Fenn reached for his scabbard and realised that he didn’t have his Knight’s dagger. “Oops!”

Mauld cocked an eyebrow. “Forgot your dagger again?”

“I was playing some serious video games... Having that thing around me is really uncomfortable. I must have forgotten it in the rush to leave the house.”

“Dim wit.”

“Go soak your head...” Fenn looked thoughtful. “You lucked out this time, Mauld. I’ll come back later. I’m going to bring an arsenal with me then.”

Mauld nodded. “I will be waiting.” He bit into the apple and walked away.

“I poisoned that!” Fenn called after him with a grin.

“I did notice that it had a distinct taste.” Mauld turned to face him again. “Arsenic?”

“How did you guess?”

“T’is not the first time I have had it.”

“Oh for the love of...” Fenn wiped a rough hand over his face. “Are you using that hocus pocus of your again?”

“I’m not a magi, Fenn,” Mauld replied, eyes sparkling with unleashed joy. “But I’m flattered by your confidence in me.”

“I want to kill you!”

“Take a number, youngling. T’will be sometime before you can get to me.”

“Really?” Fenn sounded disappointed.

“Aye, really. Now, why do you not go back to the Alliance and tell them to send someone else to assassinate me? If I must be killed, I insist that it be someone else besides you.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Fenn asked, flustered. “Just because my hair is nicer and better than yours, you don’t have to be so bitter.” He shook the black mane back, as if to stress his point.

“There is nothing wrong. I would just rather it be someone else. I would hate to kill someone I have grown attached to.” Mauld smirked.

Fenn threw his arms in the air. “Fine! I’ll see what I can do. But you better keep my house out of this!” He stormed off.

Your house? Whatever does that have to do with this? Mauld chuckled. Fool. Did you really think you could kill me so easily? He regarded the apple. T’is a good thing I used Biokinesis before I bit into you, my deadly friend. Otherwise I would be suffering a most painful death. He took another chunk. And I am so ever glad that you chose not to gun me down with your greatest gift, my old friend. Or have you even found out the potential you hold? My Psionics would prove most useless against you.

“What took you so long?” Keith demanded.

“Saint Lawrence interrupted me.” Mauld arched an eyebrow. “My apologies... Viceroy,” he emphasised the last, almost as a reminder to Keith who was truly in command in the political rank.

Keith sighed. “And Fenn?”

“Managed to escape.” Mauld shrugged.

“Another lie?” Keith clasped his hands on the desk.

“What do you mean?” Mauld sounded indifferent.

“You did lie about Lotor.”

“Did I?” Mauld looked at him askance. “Or did you lie to yourself? Viceroy, I took your word that the King had been assassinated. I informed the Emperor of this fact after I inspected the location where you allegedly claimed that you had killed him and found no vestige of D’ssat or Morphay. You played me for a fool and I fell for it.” Mauld advanced towards Keith. “You have placed me in a very dangerous predicament!” He slammed his fist down on the desk. “Not only you did not kill those buffoons, but they were also here for all this time without our knowledge. Rest assured that His Excellency will not be pleased by this.”

Keith shrank back from the pseudo display of anger. “You said you did a scan. You said you found nothing. How was I to know that Lotor could survive a fatal sword wound?”

“Foolish man! Do you not know about Drule and Doomite physiology? Even hybrids heal at a great speed. To kill a member of either race, you have to hit him in a vital organ or he will not die. This is no secret, Viceroy. Now, do not presume to think that you can accuse me of failure when the idiocy was on your part!”

Keith sighed. “Fine! So I made a mistake.”

“A dandy of a mistake, I might add.” Mauld’s eyes shifted several times before he sighed and sat down. “I will try to appease His Excellency when he finds out about this. I do not promise you anything. The emergence of this news will probably result in our execution.”

“Must you inform him? I know that the soldiers involved in the mission will not speak of what has transgressed. You could always just stay quiet and pretend we never even saw Lotor.”

My, my! Are you playing my games now, Viceroy? I see my seed has grown healthy and strong. You are mine now. Now for a little more contamination... Mauld’s eyes flickered and Keith flinched involuntarily.

“What you suggest is treason,” Mauld responded simply.

“It’s your skin too, Mauld. His Excellency will see this as our combined work. He might think that we were plotting against him,” Keith asserted.

“Too true...” Mauld fell thoughtful. “I will give the matter some thought, and inform you of my decision on the morrow.” He got up and left. *Indeed, fate deals me trump cards at every turn.* He laughed, amused.

“Your Majesty...” Mauld bowed. “I hope today finds you well.”

Allura looked at him. “Well enough.”

Mauld studied her. She was wearing one of the gowns the servants had given her, since her uniform had been taken away to be cleaned. The gown was a vivid red – though to Mauld’s eyes it was a dull, dark grey – strapless with a sensuous, plunging neckline. The voluminous skirts reached to the floor and the bodice hugged her torso smugly. He swallowed involuntarily, taking in the sight.

“Have you reached a decision yet?” He sounded indifferent. “His Excellency would know the answer at your earliest convenience.”

Allura flowed to Mauld, and stood before him, looking deep into his eyes; her blue orbs reflecting the enthralling violet. Finally, she reached and placed her delicate hands on the well-defined muscles of his arms, and stroked the exposed length of skin between the gloves and the dragon ailettes that secured his cape. Mauld swallowed almost nervously. He kept his arms still, waiting to see what Allura would do next.

And your eyes are like hers... How I wish it were her here instead of you. I have oft dreamt about her touching me as you are... He shivered lightly.

“I’ll sacrifice myself again and marry you.” She looked straight ahead at his chest. “I’m certain you will not be satisfied by title alone...”

"I have said that I will not take you by force... or against your will." Mauld moved away and leaned against a table. "Preparations will be made and in two days we will be married. Then you will leave Province Eighteen and return to Arus. When asked you will say you married me out of love. If they want to know why I am not with you, t'will be due to political matters."

"No one is going to believe this." Allura looked at him askance.

"That is not important. I do not care what anyone will believe or not. All that it matters is that you follow this contract."

"I'll do whatever it is necessary to save my people."

"Even sacrifice a whole galaxy?" Mauld raised an eyebrow.

"I cannot do all!" Allura spun around to face him. "What do you really want me to do, Mauld? What do you want me to feel?! You have taken everything from me. Voltron is destroyed, my friends are dead and Keith has been perverted!" She wiped her tears away roughly. "If you want me to hate myself, well, you're succeeding!"

Mauld went to her and held her tightly. "Shh... I do apologise, Milady. I did not wish to see you cry. My intensions were never to hurt you." He lifted her chin and caressed away her tears. "I do, howe'er, have a wedding gift for you... I did not tell you of this earlier because I did not know if I could indeed secure it."

Allura knitted her brows. "I don't want anything. I just want peace."

"This will grant you some peace of mind at least, I assure you." Mauld pulled away hesitantly and leaned back against the table. "Would you hear of it now or later?"

"Tell me."

"Another Fortress stands. I suppose you can understand the implications of that," Mauld said quietly. "And there, more Sentinels will be built to outfit new pilots..."

"You mean..." Allura looked expectant, hoping she had understood the encrypted message.

"Aye... T'is easy to deceive a child." He smiled tenderly at her.

She went to him and rested her forehead on his chest. "Why didn't you tell me this? Why did you lie about it before?"

"I did not know that it would be possible." *Am I supposed to resist temptation? And she wants me?! Truly, this cannot be!* Mauld embraced her, and again, raised her chin so that she could face him. "You desire me?" he asked bluntly.

"No."

Mauld felt like he had been kicked on a rather delicate portion of his anatomy. "Then...?"

"I suppose I only seek comfort." Allura sighed.

"Oh..." Mauld pulled away and began to walk out. "I must, howe'er, postpone this, Milady. I have other matters to attend to."

Allura watched him go and smiled after the door closed behind him. *Men... so easy to toy with.* She shook her hair back. *Mauld, do you really think I would ever feel anything for the likes of you? You're either too much of an egotist or simply a fool.* She chuckled. *Or perhaps both!* She cocked her head. *Although I must admit that you're quite... handsome. Perhaps we will have a honeymoon.* Allura startled suddenly. *What am I thinking?*