

**Warning:** N/A

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“How do you expect me to hold a summit here?” Keith asked incredulously. “Do you realise that that smuggling Drule into Arus is not exactly easy?”

Argos looked undaunted. “Knight Akira, it’s imperative that we hold this meeting. It possesses major political impact. Abbot Bÿsmann has stated that he will not come to the Milky Way and we certainly can’t go to the Outer Rim Territories. Arus is in an ideal geographical location.”

Keith hung his head. “What am I supposed to tell my wife?”

“You’re not. No one is to know. It’ll only be Prime Minister Quarq and two Rooks. The Abbot is only bringing one Bishop and besides Troy, you and myself, there will only be two other Knights.”

“When?” Keith sighed.

“In a fortnight.” Argos inhaled deeply from his cigar. “I’ll send all other details with a code. Send me all co-ordinates and place of soiree.”

Keith nodded. “As you wish, Lord Argos.”

*I don’t believe I just agreed to this, Keith thought distraught. If Allura finds out... And whatever am I going to say to them to get off baby-sitting duties? Heck... Listen to me... Baby-sitting duties indeed! From Captain of the Voltron Force and King of Arus to: Keith, the Babysitter! I suppose I deserve it. I mean, whatever I did while I was Viceroy must have been pretty bad... And Lotor is probably laughing at me. He looked up. Well, I hope you roll off your cloud!*

*“...Don’t you dare come to me and lay such an accusation on me, my dear little cousin, I don’t have a good history, but I assure you I would have never killed her or even attempted it!” He sneered. “Can you say the same?”*

Keith startled at the memory. *Go away, Lotor! Leave me alone!* He groaned. *This is what I get for cursing the dead.*

And yet the voice repeated itself, making Keith cringe involuntarily at the vague memory he had while he had been the ruler of Province Eighteen.

*Fine! I deserve my fate, Keith concurred grudgingly. But, mother... I never meant to hurt you. I love you...* He buried his face in hands and cried.

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“Won’t!” Skathen stomped his foot down.

“Skay, it’ll only be for a few days,” Keith pleaded.

“Humph!” Skathen raised his chin regally and crossed his arms stubbornly.

Keith rolled his eyes heavenward and threw his arms up in supplication. *Whatever did I do to deserve this?* he wondered. “Skathen...”

“Keith, I’ve been looking for you all day,” Allura said as she entered the room.

“Hi,” Keith responded meekly.

“Mom! Key wanna run away!” Skathen proclaimed and rushed to her.

Keith groaned and his shoulders slumped visibly.

“And he won’t take me!” Skathen huffed.

Keith noted Allura’s confused expression and tried not to glare at Skathen who was hugging Allura just below her swelled stomach. Looking at the boy so close to the life that was about to emerge from Allura, and somehow himself, brought a smile of joy to his lips.

“I was telling Skathen I was thinking about going for a camping trip,” Keith began.

“A camping trip?” Allura knitted her brows and crossed her arms. “Excuse me?”

*Oh, great! I’ve been married for only eight months and I forgot rule number three already! Never tell a pregnant woman that you’re leaving her, regardless of circumstances!* Keith swallowed nervously. “Allura, honey...”

“What is it?” Allura began to tap her foot.

Skathen’s eyes lit up and Keith suppressed a groan. Whatever Skathen found amusing generally meant that mischief was brewing. Skathen released Allura and stood just behind her to

her side and studied her briefly before crossing his arms and turning a stern gaze on Keith, mimicking Allura's pose.

Keith was not certain if he wanted to guffaw at the child's antics or strangle him. Allura glanced at Skathen and blinked disapprovingly at him.

"Skay..." She warned.

Saffron eyes shifted up to regard her. "Hum?" He looked the epitome of innocence.

Allura shook her head and decided that reproofing the child would prove next to useless and focused back on Keith. "What's this about a camping trip?"

"The Alliance is holding a summit and I'm required to attend," Keith explained. "I can't get out of it."

"Fine. Take Skathen with you."

Keith's jaw dropped.

"Keith, with you gone, there really won't be anyone to look after him. I can't keep up with him in the state I'm in." She pointed to her belly. "The others will be busy monitoring the airspace in case Zarkon puts it in his ugly head to come here and lay siege to the planet. I'll call Sven to come over and replace you. As it is, we're down one Dirge since I can't really pilot."

"Nan can look after him," Keith countered, knowing Sven was going to be at summit.

"She could if Skay would let her."

Skathen nodded solemnly, finding the matter of outmost importance to his welfare. "Nan's slow. She don't play good."

"She doesn't play good," Allura corrected distractedly.

"That's right," Skathen concurred. "Why you repeat me?" He scowled.

Allura shook her head dismissively.

"Honey, I can't take him. I mean, this is an official meeting. I can't be expected to take a child with me," Keith argued.

"Fine! I'll just look after him myself!" Allura took Skathen's arms. "Cam'on, dibbon, let's go and find some ice-cream."

Keith seethed at the pet name, knowing she was quoting Lotor. *How long are you going to haunt me?* he demanded. *How long will I have to put up with your memory?* "Allura," he called as she reached the door. "Please, don't be upset. I just can't take him. I mean..."

"Fine." Allura raised a hand forestalling him. "It's okay, really. I mean, I did take him with me on the last court Romelle held to discuss the financial expectancies of the Diamond Galaxy and Demos... But with you is different. You're a man..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Keith asked, arms akimbo.

"Oh, nothing." Allura shrugged nonchalantly. *See, Lotor, I can use your cockiness constructively*, she cheered herself.

"Honey, the men who are going to be there..."

"It's okay!" Allura interrupted him. "I understand all this macho stuff, it's all good. Come on, Skay..."

"He's my responsibility, you know." Keith crossed his arms. "I did adopt him."

"I know, Key." She smiled at him. "But you have to hang out with your male partners and it would just look really bad for you to have to bring your little child."

"How come?" Skathen asked curiously.

"Because it's a man thing," Allura explained.

"Oh." Skathen fell thoughtful.

"Allura, you're not being fair," Keith declared.

"Of course I am!" Allura's eyes widened. "I'm giving you complete freedom to go and attend to your business. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm having a major craving and I just found a date to attend a major junk food function down in the kitchens with me." She tried to usher Skathen out again.

"Skathen will be coming with me," Keith asserted.

"No, he will not. All the guys will make fun of you for bringing a baby with you."

"Yeah!" Skathen agreed. "What baby?" He scowled confused.

Keith sighed. "They'll not make fun of me for bringing my son. And even if they did, I really don't give a toss. I'm very proud of being Skay's father."

"You're not my dad." Skathen's eyes hardened and he locked his jaw.

“Shh...” Allura gathered him close to her. “It’s not like that.”

Skathen continued to hold Keith’s eyes with an unrelenting firmness. Keith could see pain and misery coursing through the saffron pools, almost as if challenging him to dare and step through the threshold. The anguish Keith saw was a living entity and he knew that if he tried to confront it he would be torn asunder by the young child in front of him. Skathen, despite of being a certified brat, was good natured and kind, as long as the topic of his paternal heritage did not emerge.

“I’m sorry, Skay,” Keith conceded. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Skathen nodded once and his eyes shifted, though they remained clouded over, wary of another comment. Keith marvelled at the oddness Skathen was able to portray and wondered if he had been as such when he had fallen prey to Mauld’s Psionic bombardment. Skathen seemed to be composed of two personalities; one that was his own and a second which emerged whenever he felt attacked by any verbal stimulus.

“Hon? Would you help him pack? I’m leaving tomorrow,” Keith continued. “We’re going to be gone for only four days.”

Allura nodded. “Sure. Let’s go, Skay.”

*Hum... Keith continued to stare at the doorway after Allura left with Skathen. If only I could ask someone what I was really like when I was the Viceroy of Province Eighteen. I remember so little of it... It’s almost like it was a long dream... or rather, a dreadful chimera. I vaguely recall Merla. He shivered. Hum... Now here’s a thought I definitely do NOT want to even mention around Allura. This is probably another marriage rule: do not talk about past relations!*

“A child?”

Keith looked down at Skathen. “He is that, isn’t he?”

Troy shook his head disgusted. “Knight Akira...”

“He’s here and he’s staying,” Keith stated. “If you have qualms with that, then I can just turn around and leave.”

Troy sighed. “Just keep him under control.”

*Easier said than done,* Keith thought not amused. “Will do.”

Keith entered the remotely located construction, abandoned for many years since the initial raids from Doom. The crumbling castle was covered by a film of dust except for an area which had been partially cleared to hold the tryst. Skathen regarded his surroundings briefly before deeming it to be mischief heaven. He smirked at Keith, who swallowed at the foreboding omen, before wrenching his hand from Keith’s and running deep into the building.

“For the love of...” Keith threw his hands in the air helplessly, but did not attempt to chase after him. He was well aware that Skathen would find a way to elude him until he deemed he wanted to be found. He followed him regardless, and figured Skathen would eventually dive on him, unable to resist temptation to knock someone over.

Skathen continued running, found a staircase and climbed to the top most floors. He entered a room and came to sudden halt when he saw a figure by the window, back turned to the door, with waist long silvery hair.

He scowled. “Dad...?”

“Welcome, little one.” The voice was melodic and serene. “I saw you arrive with the King.” The figure turned to face Skathen.

Skathen cocked his head and was disappointed to see that the man sporting the same hair as his father, in reality, was not him. In fact the stranger was pale-skinned with dancing violet eyes. “Who’re you?”

“My name is Mauld... And you are? T’is strange that King Akira would have a child such as you as his companion...”

“I’m Skay,” Skathen introduced himself, unable to say his own name in full.

“Skay... Are you the King’s son?”

Skathen narrowed his eyes. “No!”

“My apologies.” Violet eyes gleamed and Mauld approached Skathen, kneeling in front of him. “I did not mean to hurt your feelings, Skay.”

“That’s ‘kay.” Skathen shrugged. “How come you’re here?”

"I am a guest if that is what you mean. But do tell me, you have me intrigued... Who are your parents, youngling?"

Skathen's eyes darkened and he looked down, tracing odd patterns in the dust which covered the floor with the toe of his boot. Mauld cocked his head and touched his shoulder gently. Skathen looked enthralled into the flickering violet orbs. Mauld released his hold, but never broke eye contact, as he unfastened the dragon ailettes from his shoulders.

"Skathen..." Mauld opened his arms as his eyes finally settled.

After a moment's hesitation, Skathen swallowed and went to Mauld, burying his face into his shoulder. Mauld held him firmly and stood, swaying soothingly. A flash of lightning streaked across the sky and Mauld caressed Skathen's hair gently, trying to comfort him.

"Cry, little one," Mauld murmured. "Release all your anguish... Your father is worthy your tears."

*Ah, D'ssat, so this is your fruit, Mauld mused. Who would have thought that you would have left a legacy? His eyes should have given his identity away. Alas! Mayhap I grow dull as I grow old... No matter. He will prove to be a fine addition to the Empire when he grows of age... His lips curved into a smile. Or mayhap not. I will not be the catalyst of any mishap in his life. Skathen, you will grow to be your own man and do with your life as you wish. I do, howe'er, promise you something... He regarded the sobbing child in his arms. Should you e'er fall prey to the Empire against your will, I shall defend you... With my own life if fate thus requires.*

Mauld walked to the window and watched as more lightning cut through the aether before a heavy spate commenced. The rain drops were large, rendering visibility through the window nearly impossible. He felt Skathen shift and looked down as the child pulled his face away and regarded him briefly.

"There you go." Mauld smiled comfortingly. "Worry not, youngling, I understand your pain, though I can offer you no relief."

Skathen nodded, rested his head on Mauld's chest and looked out of the window; his face streaked with tears, reflecting the storm without.

*Dad? How come you went away? Skathen brooded. I'm gonna blow up the naughty person who... He scowled, uncertain as to what had indeed happened. All naughty people. I'll not let them hurt you ever again, okay, dad? I'll go find them and hurt them for you.*

Mauld followed his gaze and the two remained quiet watching the storm raging across the land. Mauld glanced down at Skathen, feeling the tumult of anguish emanating from the child through Empathy. He swallowed involuntarily before looking outside again, his heart constricting with the pain his mind was registering.

*You are yet so young... Mauld sighed, feeling his eyes growing moisten. Can you handle so much pain? Will you e'er heal from witnessing your father perishing within the catafalque Mourn became? Shall you survive this trial? One such as you should ne'er have been exposed to this strife, youngling. You have yet much to see and face...*

*Hum... another is coming... Mauld sent a tendril of energy to identify the newcomer. His Majesty no less... I wonder how he will react to this visage. He smiled mischievously.*

"Skay...? Mauld?!" Keith gasped.

"Your Majesty." Mauld bowed his head courtly. "I do hope you will grant me forgiveness, howe'er, circumstances do not allow me to greet you appropriately."

"What are you doing to my..." Keith swallowed the rest of the sentence. "To Skathen?!"

"Naught else than meets the eyes." Mauld arched an eyebrow. "He found me here." He looked down at Skathen. "Will you not tell him what has expired during our short soiree?"

Skathen turned his head to face Keith. In the distress he had not recognised the voice, but upon seeing his cousin, he struggled out of Mauld's arms and rushed to Keith, who scooped him up and held him gently.

"Why are you crying?" Keith asked concerned before casting Mauld a glare.

"He knows my dad," Skathen whimpered.

Keith held him firmer as he began to cry anew. "What did you...?"

"Naught," Mauld interrupted. "The youngling found me within this chamber and told me who he was. Fault only the memory which still pains him. I did naught else than offer him solace when he needed."

Keith locked his jaw and continued caressing Skathen's hair. "You had no right..."

"I have had quite enough of this senseless batter of words, Your Majesty." Mauld went to the centre of the room and retrieved his fallen cape and ailettes. "If you wish to start a brawl, either verbal or physical, then come forth cleanly rather than using a child as an excuse." He began to fasten his uniform.

Keith locked his jaw. "I wouldn't soil my hands on the likes of you, Mauld."

Mauld snapped the last buckle in place, blinked languidly and crossed his arms. "Would not or could not?"

"You..." Keith seethed.

"Aye, me, Your Majesty. I am your bane and shall fore'er be. Do not think that you will e'er see the last of me..." He cocked an amused eyebrow. "But you do have me intrigued. How is it that you are in the possession of D'ssat's child?"

"I guess you don't know all there is to know, eh?" Keith sneered.

"Your Highness, I have been kept rather busy of late with the Empire's internal affairs. I have not the time to go scampering across the stars acquainting myself with the latest gossips." Mauld smiled. "I also did not feel I would be a welcome presence in your mind. Howe'er, if you wish me to intrude..."

Keith took a step back. "Don't you dare, Mauld!"

"Is this fear I detect?"

"No, just disgust," Keith spat. "You make me sick."

"I have that effect on many." Mauld shrugged indifferently. "But you have not told me why Prince Skathen is under your protection. I do not believe Prince Lotor would have gone to Arus only to ask his cousin to be his son's guardian," he leered.

"Mauld..." Keith tried to suppress his anger. "Drop dead!" He stormed off, more upset over the fact that he couldn't lash out at Mauld on account that Skathen was in his arms.

Mauld waited until Keith was some distance away before throwing his head back and laughing. *Another threat upon my life! Ah yes, not a day goes by without me hearing at least one.*

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"Hey, Russian," Fenn greeted. "How's it hanging?"

Sven cast him a withering look.

"What up your crevice?" Fenn sneered back. "You know, your face might stick that way!"

"Do cut him a break, youngling." Mauld put his arm around Fenn's shoulder before leaning against him. "Prime Minister Sven Eriksson, I hope today finds you weal."

"I was doing fairly well before I laid eyes on you." His gaze encompassed both men.

"He's so bitter about life." Fenn shook his head grievously.

"I am certain that he is not." Mauld began to usher Fenn away. "Come, refreshments are being laid out and there is another Knight you can taunt, Saint Lawrence."

Fenn's eyes sparked in glee. "Oh joy!"

Mauld chuckled as they made their way to what was once the throne room of the crumbling castle. Sven followed resentfully and sat as far from them as possible.

"Despicable creatures," he cursed.

Keith sighed. "Just ignore them. We'll be out of here in three days. Just hang in there."

"What's the purpose of this meeting anyway?"

"Emperor Zheppo," Keith clarified. "No one is certain what he is planning to do. The Lords and the Abbot want to deploy Pieces to fall him, but no one's sure how the Prime Minister of Rooks will react. We have to reach a common ground before any decisions can be made."

"The Rooks wouldn't move against anyone," Sven stated. "They are too weak. Pathetic, really. I mean, if they were Bishops I would be worried. But the Rooks? Bah!"

Keith nodded his head. "Still, removing the Emperor of the Dark Ring Galaxy is not a decision that is simply made and even the Lords, despite them being complete fools, realise that."

"And why is Mauld here? He is, after all, Zheppo's Admiral."

"But he is a Bishop first," Keith reminded.

Sven snorted. "And what a better Piece to deploy than him..." He shook his head. "I mean, Mauld is his lap dog and he has full access to all of Zheppo's chambers. It would be the perfect move. Mauld returns, eliminates the Emperor and weasels his way out. Since he's a

Bishop, he'll find a haven in the Outer Rim Territories and no one would dare wage war against the Abbot."

"Too true..."

"Ha!" Fenn's guffaw interrupted him. "No one, and I mean, *no one* has ever been able to hit yours truly over here." He poked himself on the chest before taking another deep drink of his wine. "I tell you, I am the ultimate bestest."

"Bestest?" Mauld queried curiously. "My, that must be indeed good..." He smirked.

"That's me!" Fenn proclaimed.

Quarq cocked his head, smiling at the intoxicated Knight. "That's indeed impressive, Knight Saint Lawrence. I wish at least one of my Rooks could boast such merit."

Fenn waved a dismissing hand. "It's nothing really..."

"Surely t'is, for you were boasting it quite fervently," Mauld countered and refilled Fenn's glass, growing increasingly more amused. "Will you not disclose to us at least of your secrets?"

"How much are you paying?" Fenn looked at him suspiciously.

Mauld's eyes glimmered and he looked elated. Fenn scowled, and before he could ask what was bringing the Bishop so much felicity, Mauld disappeared from beside him.

There was a communal gasp as everyone startled before Fenn suddenly squealed due to a powder bomb exploding over his head. Mauld appeared from his Dimension Slide a few chairs from Fenn, closer to Sven, and collapsed into mirthful laughter.

"Ah, yes, the Grand Knight Saint Lawrence!" Mauld proclaimed. "Falling target to a mere child after his claims of being untouchable!"

"Where's that twerp?!" Fenn got up, baby-powder falling from him. "I'm going to..."

"Fenn." Keith stood up. "You're going to do nothing."

Throwing his powder-covered drink across the room, Fenn put his hands on hips and looked challenging at Keith. "Oh, you try and stop me, little man."

"I've had it!" Keith yelled and lunged towards Fenn.

"This should prove delightfully entertaining," Mauld commented.

Fenn dodged Keith and continued running trying to find Skathen. Mauld's eyes glimmered but he remained still, watching Keith trying to catch Fenn.

"Stop this nonsense!" Argos bellowed.

"Hey man! I'm just trying to get my revenge," Fenn countered, twirling past Keith.

"Don't you dare touch a single strand of hair on his head!" Keith screamed.

"Oh, stifle yourself." Fenn graced him a raspberry.

Unbeknownst to all in the room, except for the Psion, Skathen, who was hiding in the rafters, found the display enormously comical and burst into a fit of giggles. This, however, caused him to overbalance and lose his tentative footing on the beam he had been standing upon. With a squeal, he began to fall.

"Skathen!" Keith screamed and darted back to the centre of the room.

Mauld assessed the situation quickly and realised Keith would not reach Skathen in time. Tendrils of violet energy formed in his mind, turning the world into a vivid lilac and he was gone from his chair again, appearing in mid air and intercepting Skathen. With a graceful spin, he concluded his descent, landing on his feet with Skathen safe in his arms.

Skathen peered around and deeming the situation safe, extricated himself from Mauld's arms and faced Fenn.

"Hah! Me get you good!" Skathen bestowed him with a raspberry and darted off.

Mauld shook his head. "Aye... The child certainly seems to act accordingly to the call of his genes."

"Why you little..."

Fenn made it to chase Skathen but was tackled by Keith. The two Knights crashed heavily to the floor in a tangle of fists.

"Enough!" Argos barked.

His hail went unheard by the two brawlers. Mauld cocked his head and formed another surge of power, sending a Telekinetic field only strong enough to separate the two men.

"I believe this meeting serves a purpose," Mauld stated. "Mayhap t'would be best if you were to co-operate."

Keith glared at Mauld, stood up and brushed the dust from himself. Fenn remained on the floor a while longer, shaking the last vestige of his drunken euphoria off.

"Knights Akira, Saint Lawrence," Lord Troy castigated. "This type of behaviour is unacceptable! You will receive a reprimand for this conduct."

"I seem to have missed much," Bÿsmann said as he entered the chamber.

"Milord." Mauld bowed. "T'was but one of the child's antics."

Bÿsmann nodded. "I trust everything is under control?" He waited for a nod from Mauld. "Then I would suggest we focus on the matter at hand."

Lord Argos grumbled before taking his seat again. "Why don't you open this ceremony then, Abbot?" he suggested acidly.

"Why not indeed?" He looked at Fenn. "Please, take your place."

Fenn scowled but felt compelled to not disobey the sagely man before him. Bÿsmann, though possessing a youthful look, was, nevertheless, a revered and dominant presence. His green eyes spoke of wisdom and power overwhelming. Confused at the emotions brought upon him by gazing into the emerald orbs, Fenn stood and retrieved his seat.

"Very well." Bÿsmann blinked laconically. "We have assembled to discuss the matter of Emperor's Zheppo's assassination."

"Think you truly that t'is feasible?" Mauld arched an eyebrow.

"Youngling, you're the Emperor's right hand and you're a Bishop. If this decision is approved, you'll be the one carrying it out."

Mauld remained quiet, lost in thought.

"Prime Minister Quarq," Bÿsmann continued. "How does the Parliament feel about this matter? After all, Emperor Zheppo is your ruler."

Quarq snorted. "Ask your Bishop." He glared at Mauld. "He's the only one who is close enough to His Excellency to make any sound judgement."

"You resent me," Mauld stated amused.

"That a hybrid would have achieved so much favour from his Excellency is not a matter that is viewed kindly upon by the rest of the Empire, Admiral." Quarq narrowed his eyes. "Undoubtedly, it had something to do your powers."

"I beg to differ." Mauld leaned back on his chair. "His Excellency maintains me at the position I am at, because I am capable of carrying out his duties efficiently."

"We don't really care about your differences," Troy snapped. "Can you do the job?"

Mauld arched an eyebrow. "So it has been decreed that His Excellency is to fall?"

Troy groaned in frustration.

"What's your thought in the matter, Mauld?" Bÿsmann queried.

"T'would be utter foolery to eliminate His Excellency from power at this time," Mauld steepled his hands before him as he spoke. "He is the only article holding the Dark Ring Galaxy together. If he falls, the Viceroy's will commence a civil war to achieve supreme command and I do not have to state that this will not be contained. As soon as certain individuals begin to fall prey to another, they will attempt to conquer other planets to re-establish themselves. The Diamond Galaxy will be the first to be affected. Coral Galaxy will most likely see their share of wars but I highly doubt anyone will pursue a battle with them for long. Like the Outer Rim, they are extremely powerful. Queen Corral has an over abundance in strength. T'would be folly to e'en attempt such move. I suggest the Emperor remains as he is."

"How lovely sweet, Mauld," Argos sneered. "Are your reasons due to your lack of courage?"

Mauld graced him with an eldritch smile. "Lord Argos, I do not have to prove to you, of all people, who I truly am and what I am capable of. You would do well to not offend me thus. If you do not like me, I cannot hope to change your view, howe'er, be more civil while we hold this soiree."

Argos nearly choked on his cigar from being thus rebuked by Mauld. *Despicable creature... I'm going to kill you.*

Before Bÿsmann could make a remark, Skathen suddenly entered the room. He regarded the men briefly before going to Keith and crawling into his lap.

"How come no one's playing?"

"Akira!" Troy growled. "Get this child out of here!"

Skathen turned his head to look at the Lord. “Won’t!” he huffed. “You’re naughty.” Mauld chuckled. “Aye, youngling, you show wisdom far beyond your age.”

“Oh, is the Bishop being rude?” Argos asked sardonically. “I mean, you just gave us a sermon about conduct.”

“Lord Argos, I was simply agreeing with a statement made by the child. Surely you cannot expect me to disagree with His Highness.” Mauld cocked his head, his eyes dancing in delight. “Skathen, how would you like to play a game with me and Knight Saint Lawrence?”

Skathen’s eyes lit up and he jumped off Keith. “Yeah!”

“How did I get suckered into this?!” Fenn demanded affronted.

“Come, come, my friend.” Mauld stood up. “T’will be the most fun you have had since the fireworks on Province Eighteen.”

Fenn leapt from his chair and stood anxiously beside Skathen. “What are we waiting for?”

Mauld’s eyes encompassed everyone in the room. “I will excuse myself from this soiree. T’would seem my presence offends more than one person and I have stated my opinion in the matter. Besides, His Majesty clearly needs company.” Mauld walked out followed by Fenn and a hopping Skathen.

Keith gritted his teeth and followed the trio out, without even a glance at the assembled company. *Why am I here anyway? They don’t need me. If anything, it’ll be Mauld who’s going to carry out the mission or Fenn. What a fat waste of my time.* He sighed. *Not only that, that rat is up to something and it’s probably to do with Skathen’s kidnapping.*

“Ah, Your Majesty,” Mauld greeted as Keith reached the outside of the castle. “His Highness was just about to teach us Skathen-Ball. Care to partake on the game?”

Keith snorted a laugh. “I’ll just watch thanks.” *And I’ll be laughing at you, Mauld... especially if you don’t wear a cup!*

Mauld shrugged and removed the ailettes. “Very well, My Prince, bombs away.”

Skathen’s eyes widened in delight and he rushed into the dense forest, chased by Mauld and Fenn. Keith watched briefly before he heard Fenn gasp and scream shortly after. The chuckle emitted from him was inevitable.

*That should teach you, Fenn, Skathen is not a foe to be underestimated... It’s your turn now Mauld.*

Skathen sat quietly on a tree branch and saw as Mauld walked casually towards him. He readied himself for a pounce and as Mauld got directly under him, Mauld looked up and caught him. Before Skathen could protest, Mauld performed another Dimension Slide and barrelled into Fenn as he appeared, throwing all three over the edge of an embankment. Skathen squealed in pleasure, protected as he was in Mauld’s arms, while Fenn yelped startled. They continued rolling until they splashed into the river running adjacent to the trees.

“Ah, yes, youngling,” Mauld gasped as they re-emerged from the water. “T’is been sometime anon I have allowed myself such tomfoolery.” He tried to ignore the stings from the lesions he received on downward travel of the river bank.

“You knocked him good,” Skathen complimented as Fenn surfaced, spitting water like geyser from his mouth. “He’s funny.” Skathen giggled.

“Aye, that he is indeed.” Mauld chuckled.

“Mauld, no more psychosis allowed,” Fenn admonished.

“I figured you needed a bath after the powder bomb.”

“I got him good!” Skathen proclaimed. “Hey! Lookit! Let’s find snakes.”

He writhed from Mauld’s grasp and began to swim further down the river. Fenn’s eyes widened and he looked at Mauld helplessly.

“T’is his game, we follow him as he wishes.” Mauld shrugged and swam after Skathen.

Skathen continued swimming until he ducked into the water. Mauld paused until he felt something tug at him and submerged. Skathen grinned impishly at him and pointed up at Fenn who was still swimming towards them. Mauld nodded as Skathen swam up to get some air.

“Fenn! What are you doing?” Keith asked, having finally found them.

“I’m baking a cake!” Fenn looked flatly at him. “What the heck does it look like I’m doing?!”

“Where’s Skathen?”

Fenn smacked his lips. "He's off doing laundry. He'll be back soon... Oh, here he is," he commented as Skathen broke the surface of the water.

"Skathen, are you all right?" Keith asked.

"Yeah, Key! Hey, lookit, he flies good." He pointed at Fenn.

"Kid, I don't fly," Fenn pointed out. "I do many things, but flying... YOW!!!"

Skathen dissolved into laughter as Fenn was suddenly ejected from the water with a tremendous force before gravity claimed him again and pulled him back down. Fenn flayed his arms in the air pathetically, in an attempt to achieve flight but, as expected, this proved rather futile and he landed with a tremendous splash in the water.

Mauld re-surfaced and grabbed Skathen who was nearly drowning from laughing. He swam to the shore and handed him to Keith.

"T'would seem the child enjoys the game." Mauld climbed on the lake-bank and shook his wet hair back.

"Key, we keep him?" Skathen inquired.

Keith scowled. "No."

Skathen cocked his head. "How come? He's fun."

Mauld threw his head back and laughed.

"Yeah, Key." Skathen shook himself, mimicking Mauld. Keith hopped backwards trying to escape the spray of water. "See, we keep him in my room." He turned to Mauld. "You wanna live with me? We eat candy and all kinda stuff."

Mauld knelt in front of him. "As tempting as your offer is, I am afraid I will have to refuse, Your Highness."

"Oh." Skathen fell thoughtful. "I gotta findda snake." And he dove back into the river.

"Rambunctious." Mauld smirked. "How did he come to be in your possession?"

"He's not an object," Keith snapped.

"My apologies, Your Majesty." Mauld bowed his head.

"Mauld, there's one thing I've always wanted to say to you." Keith crossed his arms.

Mauld looked up at him, still kneeling on the ground. "Do enlighten me."

"I despise you."

With laughter erupting from his very core, Mauld sat back on his heels and enjoyed the mirth which inundated him completely.

"It wasn't funny!" Fenn suddenly screamed, swimming towards the shore. "I could've died, dontchya know?!"

Keith gritted his teeth, trying to control his anger so not to inflict violence upon Mauld.

"Lookit! I found it!" Skathen proclaimed as he emerged.

"Found what?" Fenn asked curiously.

"A snake." And he tossed the creature in question at Fenn.

"Eeeeeek!!!!" Fenn squealed and went under as the snake was flung at him.

"Oh heck." Keith rolled his eyes. "Fenn is afraid of snakes."

Mauld took a deep breath, trying to stifle his laughter and looked at the water. "Hum... If I remember correctly, that is a rather poisonous species as well."

Keith's eyes widened and he dove into the water to retrieve Skathen who was swimming towards the snake to catch it again. The animal writhed in the water momentarily before diving in to seek Fenn, whom it believed to be the source of disturbing its recent diurnal torpid state.

"Bravo," Mauld said standing up. "Youngling, you are more trouble than you look." Mauld cocked an eyebrow and using Telekinesis, brought the snake to his hands. "Why, my deadly friend, t'is not time for you to feed yet, nor bring about anyone's end." He looked into the reptilian eyes. "Pity your cognition is so limited, t'would be indeed interesting to have a pet such as you."

"It would match your personality," Keith sneered.

"Oh, do give it a rest, Your Highness, your insults are getting feeble." Mauld's eyes continued to flicker, taunting the snake. "And I would recommend you tend to your friend, he has been within the waters for quite some time now." The snake hissed at him. "Aggressive, are you not?" He caressed its head with his free hand. "Worry not, you shall regain your freedom shortly."

Retrieving Fenn and Skathen from the river proved a rather challenging task for Keith. When the trio had finally reached the shore, Mauld knelt and set the snake free again, much to

Skathen's loud protests. Keith, used as he was to the child, pointed at a spot in the woods and managed to draw Skathen's attention from the snake and onto something else.

Fenn sat dejectedly on a rock hoping that the sun would dry him. "You know, Keith, bringing Junior was just not cool. I mean, he's a complete brat."

"Oh stuff it, Fenn. You've just got ophidiophobia," Keith shot.

"At least it's not musophobia," Fenn snorted. "Besides, that was a big one."

Mauld shook his hair back. "Ah, yes. I forget their name now. T'is surprising it did not coil and devour the young Prince. He is indeed quite lucky."

Keith shuddered at the thought. "Mauld, do us a favour and be quiet."

Mauld bowed mockingly. "I will do better, Your Majesty. I will take my leave from your company. I am certain the others are either saying horrible things about me or I am being deployed to assassinate His Excellency." He knitted his brow. "Ah, another perfect uniform ruined." He brushed some of the dampness from the velvet.

"So what we call that?" Fenn peered at him.

Mauld paused, looked up from his clothes and cocked his head. "Call what?"

Fenn snapped his fingers. "Aha! Automysophobia!"

Mauld's eyes went round in surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're afraid of getting dirty."

Keith shook his head, trying to prevent Fenn from inflicting his brain with any damage. "How the heck do you know that?!"

Fenn shrugged. "I memorised them all."

Mauld chuckled. "Well done, Knight." He began to walk away. "T'was good to spend such a pleasant afternoon with you."

Keith watched him go with a disgusted look on his face. "Do you think he'll carry out the Game if they tell him to?"

Fenn snorted. "Unlikely. If anything he'll persuade them that 'His Excellency' should not be killed. I mean, Mauld may be many things but he's also very faithful to that Zheppo creature."

Keith nodded, finding no flaw in the statement.

"You know what, bro, I think you should just grab the tyke and get out of here."

Keith scowled. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, he's a handful and he seems very keen on freaky over there." Fenn pointed at Mauld's retreating back with his chin. "And what's more, freaky seems very keen on Junior."

Keith crossed his arms. "You're just afraid of getting bombed again."

"Well, that was supposed to be read between the lines and stay there!" Fenn sighed, rolling his eyes. "Listen up, pal, Junior got me, ME! Me, me, me!"

"You, you, you... so what?"

"So what?! I'll tell you what. I'm untouchable, the Brotherhood's Knight extraordinaire. I'm not supposed to be hit by a baby! And what's more, I don't like the way baby powder smells."

Keith nodded thoughtfully. "It was dumb bringing him... Skathen!" He called.

"What?!"

"Let's go in."

"Won't!" Skathen responded from a tree.

Keith groaned.

"You don't know the first thing about children." Fenn let out a loud breath. "Hey, brat, Mauld's gone in. Why don't you follow him and drill him with a bomb?"

Before Keith could react, Skathen jumped from the tree and darted back to the castle.

"Son of a gun..." Keith mumbled in awe.

"Gentlemen," Fenn greeted as he entered the throne room. "I hope you didn't miss me too much."

"Terribly." Mauld moved to stand beside him. "My heart constricted with the thought of ne'er feasting my eyes you again."

Fenn stared at him oddly. "Why is that?"

"Oh." Mauld waved a dismissing hand and disappeared.

“Uh oh...” Fenn shut his eyes as a powder bomb hit him again, coming from the direction where Mauld had stood.

“You see, His Highness was plotting another one of his antics,” Mauld continued on Fenn’s other side. “My uniform is still damp, I do not wish to further ruin it by having powder on it.”

“Where’s he?!” Fenn screamed. “Let me at him.”

A giggle echoed through the chamber but Skathen remained invisible.

Fenn looked up at the rafters and found them devoid of the child’s presence. He continued scanning his environment until Keith entered and regarded him with a smirk.

“Back fired?” He nudged Fenn.

“Be quiet!” Fenn snapped.

“Akira, that’s quite enough!” Argos rebuked. “This is not a playground. Take the child and leave. We’ll not make advancements in this plan with this distraction.”

Mauld crossed his arms. “Lord Argos, what exactly do you wish to achieve? Do you truly want to sway everyone into assassinating His Excellency? Think you that by prolonging this senseless soiree will change anyone’s mind? This is but a waste of time.”

“The three Brotherhoods assembled for four days is rather foolish,” Bÿsmann concurred. “I, for one, vote against removing Emperor Zheppo from the Board.” Green eyes shifted to Quarq. “And what says you, Prime Minister?”

“His Excellency has done much for us,” Quarq responded quietly. “I can’t, in good conscience vote for his elimination. The Dark Ring has been optimised and we’ve achieved perfect synchronization.”

Mauld smiled subtly and exchanged a knowing glance with Bÿsmann.

“Very well.” Bÿsmann turned to Lord Argos and Troy. “If you wish to deploy a Knight to fall Emperor Zheppo, you are free to do thus. But,” he glanced at Mauld, “know that a Bishop will be on standby and will intercept that Piece.”

“I volunteer.” Fenn looked fiendishly at Mauld. “It’ll be a pleasure to take you and the Emperor out.”

Mauld cocked an eyebrow and graced him with an impish grin. “Knight, you have failed in the past to eliminate me. Do not think that you will succeed on the Main, where I am strongest.”

Fenn fell thoughtful. “Hold the phone!”

“Aye.” Mauld narrowed his eyes balefully, the smirk never leaving his perfect lips. “You failed, Saint Lawrence. Your record is not as impeccable as you would wish. You failed to eliminate me from the Board when you were sent and you will fail again if you make such foolish attempt once more.”

Fenn’s face cleared, all lunacy leaving him. Keith shuddered and took an involuntary step back as the mismatched eyes grew hard and cold. He had rarely seen Fenn display his true self; he was almost sorry for Mauld.

“Are you challenging me?” Fenn’s tone was even and sharp; like the steel of newly forged sword. “Can you handle it, Bishop?”

Claws slid silently from gloves. “Aye, Knight. I am always willing to play a game.” Mauld’s sardonic demeanour remained unchanged.

“Enough!” Bÿsmann slammed his fist down on the table. “Bishop Mauld Impruss! Conduct yourself appropriately. Knight Fennylaise Saint Lawrence, recall your challenge!”

Keith shut his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

The two men continued staring into each other’s eyes daring the other to break the contact first. Mauld’s eyes flickered continuously, taunting Fenn. The Bishop was well aware that Psionics would not be effective against his antagonist and even if it had been possible, Mauld rarely chose to employ such weapon in a fight.

“Naughty!” Skathen suddenly scolded walking into the room.

Keith hung his head, his shoulders slumping visibly. *I knew it... He took his time, but I knew this was coming. Oh, Allura, I hope you’re happy. I have Skathen here and he’s making a complete fool out of me...* He groaned.

Skathen looked at Bÿsmann briefly before regarding the two men again. “You go lookka the wall until he says it’s okay to go away.” He put his hands on his hips. “You’re naughty!” He clicked his tongue disapprovingly at the pair and shook his head.

Mauld's lips trembled for a few brief moments before Fenn suddenly snarled in disgust. Mauld, no longer able to suppress his leashed mirth, laughed as he scooped Skathen into his arms.

"Youngling, you are indeed something else!" He turned to the men assembled in the room. "I bid you all farewell, gentlemen. I am going to quit this soiree at this time. My orders have been issued and woe to any Piece who dare enter my realm." He turned to Skathen. "And t'was a great pleasure meeting you, Your Highness." He handed him to Keith. "T'would be a great honour if we were to meet again." And with a flourish of his cape, Mauld turned and exited the room.

"Not if I can help it," Keith murmured under his breath.

"What was that, Key?" Skathen queried.

Keith shook his head. "Nothing..." He turned to the gathered men. "I'll also take my leave... unless I'm needed."

Troy waved a dismissing hand in antipathy. "Go."

Keith hid his smirk and left, to commence his journey back to the Castle of Lions.