

Warning: Violence, angst, sexual innuendo.

Acknowledgement: I would like to cordially thank AK47 for his input for some of the Keith dialogues.

Promises of Old Shalt Become New

Mauld looked up slowly as he caught the noxious scent of smoke. He blinked in a calculative manner as the Lords of the Alliance Knights' Club entered the boardroom. The Abbot of the Bishops' Monastery recoiled lightly at the smell, but remained otherwise impassive. The Prime Minister of the Parliament of Rooks scowled disdainfully.

"I see you are still not known for keeping time," Mauld stated.

Argos exhaled smoke casually. "And I see you're still not known for manners."

"We all have a schedule," Abbot Bÿsmann commented. "If you lead such a lax life, that is none of our concern, however, remember that we do not possess that luxury."

"Some of us strive to complete tasks before they are due," Prime Minister Quarq retorted with an acid undertone.

Argos raised an eyebrow, and sat down. He was well aware of Quarq's animosity towards him. "Very well." He inhaled from his cigar. "Now then, gentlemen, what do you propose we do about this upstart?"

"So far, all the Pieces that we have sent to Checkmate the King have been met with demise, although spies have informed me that they believe the Pieces are simply being kept as prisoners, since there has been no executions." Mauld crossed his arms. "I know not what the King's intentions are, but I do not like this turn of events; even if the Pieces have not been terminated."

"What else do you know of their Brotherhood?" Lord Troy asked. "I'm aware that you had an audience with the King."

Mauld sighed and shook his head. "As far as I know, there are only two of them, the King and his Advisor Marzad. I do not believe the King has the time for the Games, so the Advisor must be Playing. As to how he has been able to be so successful, t'is quite beyond me." He paused. "He is obviously a hack'r and he is getting the information ere the Games are to happen, but that also takes time. He cannot do both at once." He arched an elegant eyebrow. "Which leads me to believe that he will slip anon. Also, other Pieces that are not involved in the game are going missing. The Queen's Nite Club is obviously out collecting Pieces to even out the sides of the Board. Generally, this takes at least a few players. The Advisor, howe'er, seems to be able to do all alone."

"Then it's obvious that Marzad should be played," Lord Argos stated.

"That's the plan." Prime Minister Quarq steepled his fingers on the table before him. "This discussion was taking place at the start..." He cocked his head. "Oh, but I do apologise! I forgot you arrived late."

Argos nodded, keeping his temper in check. "With him out of the picture, then it'll be much easier to reach the King."

"The question is then, who is to be sent?" Mauld said. "Our best Rooks are captured. The Bishops have not yet been targeted, and I hear that your two best Knights have gone missing."

"And one of them no other than Akira..." Bÿsmann added casually. "Was he not the one who raised the present King of Doom? And was he not given the Game before?"

Troy nodded. "As you are aware, Abbot, Games can be put on hold," he reminded. "And as for Akira, he was warned of the consequences if he failed."

"Hum... The old collateral damage," Quarq leered.

Argos nodded. "The Games must be played at all costs. You all contributed to the rules..." He paused. "However, we do have another Knight that can take the game. He'll not be so hesitant about harming the King. In fact, he'll be more than willing to take on the Game."

Mauld nodded. "Very well." He paused. "Should he fail, howe'er, I think t'will be time to remove the King through other methods." *Ah, youngling, you are causing me much problem. I*

cannot keep you safe if you continue getting yourself into trouble. Soon, I will be forced to take evasive actions to ensure your safety.

“Like?” Bÿsmann asked simply.

“War, of course.” Mauld shrugged indifferently. “The King knows the Alliance is not pleased with his ascension to power and he has ne’er sworn himself to us. Either side could declare war on Province Eighteen.” He smiled lightly. “And as we know, the planet does not possess the fire power to resist an attack for very long from either front.”

“That, of course, excludes the Outer Rim.” Bÿsmann blinked slowly. “This war have never affected us and we are not about to take sides now.”

“You are not expected to,” Mauld intoned smoothly. “We will take out the trash.” He paused. “What of Saint Lawrence? The game was his as well.”

Argos sighed loudly. “That head case has gone missing again.”

“He does that sometimes. He simply vanishes every now and then and no one can ever find him.” Troy sounded annoyed.

“Have you no control o’er your own Pieces?” Mauld asked.

“Saint Lawrence is a good Piece to have even if he’s so unstable,” Argos concurred. “He has never really given us a reason to be terminated.”

Bÿsmann knitted his brow. “Mauld, how is the Emperor reacting to this sudden emergence. I know he does not like up-heaves in his domain.”

“His Excellency is very displeased,” Mauld concurred quietly. “He wants to simply destroy Eighteen, e’en if t’is in a strategic place for a military command base.”

“And you have convinced him otherwise?” Troy asked sarcastically.

“I do not pretend to possess such talent.” Mauld’s eyes danced with felicity. “I simply offer my suggestions when asked. So far, he has listened to my thoughts on matters and taken my words into consideration. I do not know his decision at present, howe’er.”

Troy leaned forward on his chair. “The best Bishop is still out on the loose, however.” He looked at Bÿsmann. “Is it not time to deploy him?”

Mauld looked over his shoulders as if trying to find this Bishop. “My, my... and here I thought I held the title.”

“Hush,” Bÿsmann berated. “This does not concern the Outer Rim.” He blinked in a calculative manner.

“King Skathen is moving against the Brotherhood!” Troy snapped. “It concerns all of us.”

“I suggest you watch your tone, Lord Troy.” Bÿsmann cast him a laconic gaze. “And as for the Bishop in question, he is the Drule Emperor’s Admiral. He cannot be in two places at the same time and as you can see, he is busy with the politics of the Dark Ring.”

“You can recall him,” Argos sneered.

“If I had a reason, I would be most glad to do thus. Alas, I do not.”

“So you’ll send no other Bishop?” Quarq asked curiously.

“No. At least not for the moment. I have established that the Outer Rim is on neutral grounds and I do not wish to change this at present.” Bÿsmann paused and looked briefly at Mauld before turning back to Argos. “Also, like you, I’ve also misplaced my other top Bishop. Her whereabouts is unknown to me.”

Smooth statement, Abbot. I will find Vulpes sooner or later, worry not, Mauld thought annoyed. And my child...

Argos nodded, knowing that the Abbot would not be swayed. “Very well, gentlemen. I think we have reached an agreement then. Another Knight will be sent, this time to target Marzad and then the King. If that fails, we’ll declare war.” He inhaled deeply on his cigar. “Tell me, Admiral, have you erred about their militia too?”

Mauld looked very amused. “I have stated all I have seen and heard. Eighteen’s fleet did not look any stronger than ere. I have not heard of any additions or improvement to the ships.” He paused. “I do not err. I transfer information as I receive it. If t’is incorrect, then the source was wrong.”

“Being the Emperor’s main agent, you are not in the position to afford mistakes,” Troy said caustically.

"I make them not," Mauld responded, still mirthful. "You make assumptions and decisions based on facts that I am simply passing on. Do not base anything on what I say, unless I inform you that the data is accurate."

Bÿsmann nodded. "You certainly learned well."

Mauld bowed lightly. "I had good teachers." He smirked. "Now, excuse me gentlemen, I must return to the Dark Ring and to my duties." He left without waiting for a response, followed by Quarq.

"Well?" Zheppo inquired.

"There is more here than they are telling us," Mauld responded nonchalantly. "And I think that we should change the game."

"How so?" Zheppo asked intrigued.

"It seems to me that the Queen of Arus has become an important element in the Galaxy Alliance once again. Be it because she is the keeper of Voltron or due to her political hold and might. For a planet without much resources or a military base, Arus has been the hardest location to fight against and it has ne'er fallen under an attack. The Alliance seems to be planning to move against Arus again."

Zheppo blinked slowly. "I don't understand then why they would be so willing to terminate such strength." He looked disgusted. "Even I would keep that woman in power. It's obvious Arus is holding out well and this provides them with the strength they need."

"Unless they feel they have lost control of the planet and its ruler once again," Mauld stated. "Mayhap they share your sentiments concerning the young King of Doom."

"They have no grounds this time. Arus has been helping the Alliance hold back our attacks since your debacle, Mauld."

Mauld shrugged, unable to suppress the smile that flourished on his lips. "Surely you now understand my reasons."

"I'm afraid not. I'm too terrified to even try and fathom your logic," Zheppo snapped acidly.

"You dethroned King Zarkon. A chain of events followed after and finally you decided to place the King back on his throne. T'was only right that everything else return to normal."

"Except Prince Lotor died and left a nuclear bomb prancing around the universe!"

"Well, that was certainly a drawback," Mauld admitted.

Zheppo sighed. "But that's not what concerns me now. The Queen of Arus has been there for many years now and shown her fealty to them. Why is the Alliance concerned now?"

"There could be many motives, Milord. I know not much about the Alliance's politics to know their rationale. Whate'er those reasons are, howe'er, they must be strong enough for the Knight's Lords to want to eliminate the Ruling Body of Arus. First they sent King Akira into an impossible mission, now they are going to send Knights after the Queen and Princess Amselle. Prime Minister Quarq believes t'was simply a threat to assure that King Akira would not fail."

"Impossible mission?" Zheppo asked peculiarly. "How so?"

"I decided to investigate King Skathen's past a little more." Mauld arched an eyebrow. "I admit I was quite fascinated with his exploits. What we have is a very dangerous opponent on the Board. The King has excelled in all his subjects in both the Academies and he is a Sword Master. All reports point to the fact that although he was not born with the natural heightened Doomite senses he has enhanced his own to the point that they can be actually more acute than ours." He paused. "I would think twice before engaging with him on a duel. I would think trice before trying to ambush him." He looked thoughtful. "Mostly, howe'er, he is reckless. And those are indeed the most dangerous of opponents."

Zheppo did not look pleased. "I see... So perhaps your suspicions are correct and the Alliance wants to null the Ruling Body on Arus... Well, it would certainly be beneficial for them. They could finally claim those Voltron Dirges for themselves and turn Arus into a military base. It's in a convenient place on the Diamond Galaxy for that."

Mauld nodded. "And that is why I think that we should change the game. We are all united when it comes to the Board, howe'er, politically we all enemies."

Zheppo leaned forward amused. "Tell me your plan."

"T'is very simple." Mauld's eyes sparkled with mischief. "We strike ere they can."

Zheppo knew his Admiral to guess what he had in mind. "Very good. Set the plan in motion at once, Mauld. Let the games begin."

"With pleasure, Your Eminence." Mauld bowed and left.

Tiella landed the stealth flier on a remote site on Arus, from where she could easily access the castle. Although she had spent only a short time on Eighteen, Skathen's and Marzad's intensive training had served her well and she moved with a feline grace she did not possess before. Her senses, although she felt safe on her home planet, were fixed to their limits, and she missed very little that was going on in her surroundings.

This was the only factor, which warned her of the approach of two Nephillims entering Arus' atmosphere and making its way towards the castle. She looked up and studied it briefly, catching a purple glimmer of its eyes under the sun light. The two crafts were cloaked against the radar, but not invisible to the eye.

So *the games begin already*, she hissed under her breath and took inventory of herself.

All the daggers were firmly affixed to her boots, her sword strapped to her waist and she quickly placed a mask over her face to prevent anyone from recognising her.

She reached the castle as the intruding jet and Nephillim landed. Familiar with the domain, she entered without being seen and made her way to her mother's apartments. Allura startled when she saw the masked and cloaked stranger come into her room. However, she recovered quickly and without hesitation, drew the blaster from her belt, training it on Tiella.

"Mother, wait," Tiella called, removing the mask long enough for her mother to see her. "You're in danger. Come with me, quick!"

"Tiella!" Allura exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

"It's a long story... Please, just listen to me. You are in grave danger."

Allura shook her head and sighed. "No. I'm not going to go anywhere, Tiella. I'm sick of not knowing what is happening around me. First Skathen, then you and finally your father go missing. I demand to know what is going on."

Tiella took a deep breath. "Father is involved with the Alliance Knight's Club. I captured him on Eighteen, when he was sent to perform his duty. Skathen inherited the Crown because, as expected, of an accident. Marzad discovered some nasty plots and told Skathen about them. It's no secret anymore that each Alliance has its own organisation of assassins. Skathen has started his own organisation, but instead of assassination, he is simply capturing the assassins and holding them until all of this madness ends."

"And where do you fit in?" Allura asked simply.

"I am the Queen in Skathen's game. I'm the one who's collecting the Pieces. When I got father, he told us that the Alliance was explicit enough to tell him that if he failed, you and I would be targeted. I can take care of myself. You didn't even know about any of this and whoever it is that is in charge of eliminating you has just landed." Tiella paused. "Please, mother, you must trust me. We must leave here quickly."

Allura sighed loudly and shook her head. "I can't just leave Arus. There will be no one else to look after anything. You know that."

"I ask you only to leave long enough until I capture this pawn. Then I'll return you here again," Tiella pleaded.

"I cannot."

"But mother! You're in danger," Tiella argued.

"Not anymore. You have just warned me of it. I'm prepared now." Allura smiled lightly. "I'm not weak and defenceless as you and your father seem to think."

Tiella knew then from whom she had inherited her stubbornness. "So there's nothing that will convince you to leave Arus even if it's just for a short time?"

"No."

Tiella considered stunning her mother and simply dragging her out back to the flier, but discarded the idea. She did not have the strength carry Allura quickly enough before they got caught and with Allura unconscious, she would not be able to fight.

Before Tiella could say anything else, she saw a man who could pass as Marzad's older brother, only his skin was white, appear at the window and sit indifferently on the sill. She

unsheathed her sword with lightning speed and stood posed, ready to face the trespasser. Allura spun, bringing up her blaster when she saw Tiella react. The Drule looked amused, as if he had the upper hand against the women, although he was not visibly armed.

“Mother, quick, get out of here,” Tiella commanded quietly, her eyes never leaving the Drule.

Allura didn't move. She eyed the man warily, knowing only too well who he was and if this was going to be replay of the events of two decades before. And that's when Allura's suspicions proved true. The door exploded in a shower of splinters and Tiella spun to face the new attack. The alarms in the castle blared deafeningly and Allura cried out.

Tiella turned her attention back to her mother and saw her fall to the floor unconscious. The Drule at the window held his arm up casually and Tiella realised that he had a wrist crossbow. She had no doubt that the dart it had fired was poisoned.

“Mother!”

Before Tiella could do anything else, her eyes caught the men who had entered through the door moving in towards her. She spun, bringing her sword in an arch and met the first man. The tip of her sword cut deep into his hand and he dropped the gun as she brought a dagger up in a whistling angle gashing his neck open. He fell to the floor gurgling in his own blood.

The other two Drules eyed her with more caution. The Drule never gave much credit to women, knowing that they were rarely trained as warriors; obviously this quarry was an exception. They could not tell what race she was because of the mask and cloak she wore, but she was undoubtedly dangerous.

Tiella assessed her situation briefly before moving again. She knew that the Drule were taken aback by her actions. She also realised that she had to keep them on the defensive. With a deadly grace, she crossed her sword and dagger and brought them close to her body moving forward again. The Drules stepped back, but Tiella had already chosen her prey. Within a few feet, she uncrossed her arms, blades making an eerie sound as they cut through air, before striking the Drule on each shoulder and penetrating deep into him. He cried out briefly in pain and collapsed to the floor as well.

The remaining Drule looked at his two fallen comrades and decided that the woman in front of him was more than he was willing to combat. He backed up slowly and ran back out the way he had come, only to be targeted by a barrage of laser blasts from the guards who were rushing up towards Allura's apartments.

Tiella turned and gasped when she saw that both her mother and the man at the window were gone. The other Drules had simply been a distraction and she had failed to see their plan. She locked her jaw, keeping the tears back and finally registered the approach of the guards. Rushing to the window and employing Skathen's training, but not as daring, she got away quickly through the only avenue of escape left for her.

She reached the garden below and continued running towards her fighter. She could see the Nephillim already airborne and returning to wherever its destination was. She gritted her teeth and decided to return to Eighteen where she would get Marzad to track down where the Queen of Arus had been taken.

“Marzad, we need a plan,” Skathen announced tiredly.

“I know.” Marzad nodded, leaning against a fireplace. “However, we do not have the resources and we cannot evacuate Eighteen. The Outer Rim, although still neutral in this war, will not accept you in, since your ultimatum on them over this ridiculous Brotherhood business.”

“Underground.” Skathen looked stunned.

“Hum?” Marzad asked puzzled.

“It's obvious the planet contains metal as a natural resource. We saw how well it tested on Griefe. It's just a matter of creating an underground civilisation.”

“And the defences?” Marzad asked.

“We can use the metal itself.” Skathen shrugged. “Create artillery which can utilise the processed metal. Given its resilience, it'll probably prove lethal as an offensive weapon. Failing that, we got enough nuclear waste. We'll stuff that in balloons and hurl it.”

“Skathen Ball?” Marzad arched a scarcely-haired eyebrow.

“Sweet!”

Marzad looked pained. “What I don’t understand is how no one ever found out about it before and if they did, why didn’t they ever use it.” He shook his head. “The properties are simply fantastic. Why did only your father use it?”

“Perhaps because the Doomites were led to believe that Eighteen was a dead planet. A floating rock in space,” Skathen ventured. “Look, let’s go back and look at the reports the archaeologists brought back. I have a feeling Eighteen holds more secrets than meets the eyes.”

Marzad and Skathen rushed through the castle and went to view the papers, which had been lying neglected since neither one of them had had the time to even acknowledge their existence. Skathen fell into a chair in shock as he scanned the information before him; Marzad blinked rapidly in surprise.

“Let the preparations begin.” Skathen rubbed his hands together and looked up. “We don’t have much time.”

Marzad smirked. “How can I argue with optimism?” His eyes sparkled.

“Look at this stuff!” Skathen jumped off his chair. “There’s metal in abundance within this planet! And look at how fertile the soil is underground where the radiation has not reached! Marzad, there’s a whole world within this world. We can build ventilation vents and not have to live in bubbles anymore. The economy will soar; especially considering the amount of stuff we can start exporting.”

“Problem is finding workers.”

Skathen rolled his eyes. “Ah yes. The old Drule and Doomite tradition: why get your hands soiled when slaves can do all the dirty work?” He shook his head. “Well, this is going to change.”

“How do you expect to convince them?”

“Hum... Survival? Maybe they will listen this time if I explain to them our situation logically and plainly.” Skathen shrugged. “Failing that, I’ll just be blunt: do or die.”

Marzad nodded. “According to this there’s also a bacteria present on the soil that is, even now, purifying the ground. You can see how it’s working from the lower layers up towards the surface clearing away the radioactive impurities. I think the only thing that has prevented this process from being completed is the fact that Eighteen is constantly being bombarded by nuclear assaults... but that’s stopped for a while now. In fact, looking at these charts, the temperature has been increasing dramatically.”

Skathen nodded. “It’ll be hard to maintain things as is. Especially considering that no one is happy with my ascension to power. Marzad, let’s get this whole thing in motion.”

Before Marzad could answer, Tiella came into the room running. The two men jumped up at her sudden entrance and stared at the weary woman puzzled.

“Someone has captured my mother,” Tiella stated.

Skathen looked alarmed. “What?!”

Tiella told them the events that had expired in Arus. Marzad scowled and leaned thoughtfully against a table. Skathen paced for a few moments before Marzad spoke again.

“The Drule looked amused, did you say?”

Tiella nodded. “Yes. He was very handsome and his eyes were the strangest things about him. They were purple.” She knitted her brows.

“Admiral Mauld,” Marzad said simply and then started visibly.

Skathen sighed. “You know, if there’s one thing worse than my accidents, is when you startle yourself.” He groaned. “Out with it, man.”

“The King said that his organisation was going to send assassins after the Queen. If this was their Game, why was the Empire involved?” Marzad asked no one in particular. “Skathen, there’s a serious issue going on here and I can’t even begin to fathom its depth.”

“All the fraternities are united somehow. We know this,” Skathen reminded.

“Yes. And that’s my point exactly. “Why would the Empire get on the way of the Alliance? Why would Mauld go to Arus to kidnap Queen Allura?”

“Father told me he was a Bishop.” Tiella finally remembered.

“What?!” Marzad demanded.

“He said that he was the most dangerous Piece of them all. Him and Saint Lawrence.”

“Oh dear...” Skathen looked pained.

“He struck her with poison.” Tiella was close to tears.

“Not anything lethal, I assure you,” Marzad explained. “He would not have taken a dead body back with him.”

Skathen raised an eyebrow. “Your coldness is rather commendable,” he commented flatly.

Marzad shrugged. “Skathen, we have a serious problem. I have a feeling that the Emperor will use the Queen of Arus against you. He knows that she raised you and that you love her as a mother. What a better person to hold against you.”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes lots of sense. They know that if the Alliance has the Queen eliminated, it would be a lethal blow on you and you would not care much about anything else. Remember that in any war, the easiest way to disable your opponent is by removing what he holds dear. The Empire could always use Arus as a point of weakness against you. However, if the Alliance had removed everything from there, then there’s nothing else the Empire could use against you, save brute force.” Marzad paused. “What I find odd is that they obviously went against the Alliance. They are playing a dangerous game. I think there’s a clause somewhere there that states: ‘thou shalt not play with thy neighbour’s toys’ or something.”

“So where’s my mother?” Tiella asked.

“I would guess on the Main,” Marzad hazarded. “I’ll access their data base and find out.”

Tiella nodded. “Wherever she is, let me know. I’ll go to her rescue.”

Skathen shook his head. “You’re not going that deep into enemy territory.”

“Try and stop me,” Tiella snapped defiantly. “Besides, there’s a matter of a Bishop to be captured.”

“Tiella, I would not send this whole planet’s armada into the Dark Ring. We don’t stand a chance. It would be sheer suicide if you were to go alone. I’m not the least satisfied over the fact that mother is being held captive, however, I also understand that at this point we cannot get to her. I doubt Mauld is going to simply let us stroll in and rescue mother.”

Tiella looked frustrated. “I can’t just let them hold my mother captive! You know well enough what may happen to her. The Drule is not known for kindness!” Her hands closed into fists. “Skay, whether or not you grant me permission to go, I’m going. And even if Marzad doesn’t tell me where she is, then I’ll just have to try complex by complex until I find her. It’s up to you if you want to make my mission easier or harder. Either way I’m going to the Main.”

Skathen looked defeated. “Fine!” He sighed. “But for now rest and regain your strength. I’ll inform you of your destination as soon as Marzad finds out where the Queen is.”

Allura opened her eyes slowly. A film covered her tongue with a distinct metallic taste and her body complained from the side effects of the poison. She struggled to her feet and looked around her surroundings without recognition. Slowly, the events returned to her. She hadn’t really felt the tiny dart pierce her shoulder until the poison on its tip had quickly entered her blood stream and she had fainted. She had woken up later, surrounded by Drule soldiers who had looked at her without any mercy, but Mauld had also been there, looking at her with a crooked smile. She had been surprised to see how attractive he still was, not having aged at all since she had last seen him. His purple eyes were the same; seeming to be smiling with unhidden gaiety. He had said very little and then watched as she was placed in a cell. Allura, still under the effects of the poison, had wondered at the contrast of the command and the tone of his voice. He had sounded casual, as if simply telling everyone that they were having a pleasurable weather. She remembered vaguely beginning to struggle and they had constrained her roughly before Mauld had snapped at them. Eventually she had succumbed to unconsciousness due to the lasting effects of the poison.

She shook her hair back. Somehow, it had fallen from the intricate bun she usually wore. She stumbled to the door and noted that it was built of solid steel and the hinges were on the outside, if the door possessed any at all. It was almost seamless the way it was moulded into the smooth stonewalls. Looking around only brought more heartbreak. The cell had no windows and the floor and ceiling were also made of the same smooth, seamless white stone.

Escape seemed to be rather impossible; at least while she remained within the cell. She had little hope that anyone would reach her. Skathen was still holding Keith captive, the other Voltron members did not know where she was and Tiella had been hard pressed with the other Drules who had entered the room. Allura prayed that her daughter was still alive and well.

Over all, she knew she was alone. She couldn't even count on the Alliance since she knew that they had also sent someone to purge her, according to what Tiella had said. She wondered vaguely if Skathen would break away from Doom to come to her rescue. She shook her head trying to clear it. He probably didn't even know what had befallen her.

Exhausted and feeling helpless at her situation, Allura sank to her knees and buried her face in her hands. She had lost concept of time. The cell glowed with a strange, artificial luminosity that granted her senses no concept or ideas. She swallowed back the tears that were threatening to emerge.

Unexpectedly, she saw a strange glimmer between her and the door. She knitted her brows, thinking that her eyes were playing a trick upon her. However, the gleam grew stronger with each passing moment until it began to take a definite humanoid shape. Allura stood up; ready to defend herself from whatever Machiavellian scheme the Empire was planning against her. She backed away slowly, giving herself more room to manoeuvre, should she be required to fight.

However, she was fascinated by this new event. She waited expectantly for it to take form. And suddenly she gasped as she recognised the figure. Allura seemed to be frozen in place as the shape finally took mundane structure and stood staring at her. This was not like the times when she had seen her father's spirit. King Alfor had been incorporeal. What stood before her was flesh and blood.

"Lotor..." she breathed.

He nodded slowly. "I promised you I would watch over you. Had I known then, I would have also told you that I would return to you at the hour of your deadliest danger." He sighed. "Alas, I was ignorant of it. I was only granted such grace, because my heart proved to be true and clean. In death, the vileness that had been shrouding me washed away and exposed the purity of my heart. You and Skathen were the cause of my cleansing. I was granted one chance to come back and protect either one of you. I trust Skathen will not need me. He has grown strong, although this strength comes from grief. You, however, although strong in your own way, lack a few elements."

Allura looked almost offended. "What do you mean?"

"It is not for me to explain or reveal it to you, my love." Lotor smiled lightly. "I have come simply to save you from your death at this time. The powers do not wish for you to leave your existence just yet, and thus I have come."

"At the hour of my deadliest danger..." She cocked her head. "Then this..."

"Means very little. This is but my judgement. Perhaps I have grown over anxious to see you and speak with you and erred in my evaluation. I cannot tell you what the fate has in store for you. I do not know. Perhaps you have faced trials far worse than this. I cannot judge. I simply watch."

"So how are we going to get out of here?" Allura paused. "Well, how can I get out of here? You're not exactly here."

"For a time I am as I once was," Lotor said quietly. "I face all the limitations imposed by the body; until it's time for me to go and enter another domain... permanently."

"How long do you have?" she asked hopeful.

"I do not know. Some hours perhaps; maybe days."

Allura looked disappointed. "I have missed you," she confessed. "Especially looking at Skathen everyday." She smiled genuinely. "He was so good to have around."

"I am glad." He looked alert suddenly. "There's someone coming." He became very wary.

So that's whom you take after, Skay, Allura thought casually. I always did wonder how you could sense what everyone else was so oblivious to.

Interestingly, the Queen of Arus felt none of the fear or helplessness from earlier. Looking at Lotor standing before her, still looking as he did when she had last seen him, brought her strength and comfort. Notwithstanding the fact that Lotor still retained his youth, primarily, he was

with her and she knew, against all logic, that he would protect her. He would defend her for as long as he could draw breath.

She smiled lightly. *But that is a lie, is it not?* she thought. *You are here and you have been gone for almost a score of years. You will always protect me. You shalt love me until the end of time.*

True to Lotor's words, the door opened and an escort of guards entered. They started at Lotor's presence, knowing that the Queen had been placed alone in the cell. Lotor took advantage of their surprise and began his attack. Unlike Keith, Lotor fought best in close quarters. Skathen seemed to also have inherited this particular feat from the former Prince of Doom. Acrobatically, he sent well-placed kicks and connected his fists with vital areas to render the guards almost unconscious. He assessed their predicament quickly and drew a sword from the scabbard one of them carried.

Used as he was to being ethereal, Lotor found the weight in his hand comforting, bringing him memories of Mourn and Rue. In fact, even the feel of his uniform against his skin granted him a long missed reassurance. He turned to Allura and extended his hand to her and turned back to face the exit to assure no other guards were coming. The touch of her hand on his, almost made him forget the predicament they were in. Again, this was something he had not felt in many years and especially coming from Allura, his beautiful Allura, who looked as vital as ever, sent electrical waves up and down his spine. He shuddered lightly.

"Let us be gone," he said more to help himself clear his mind.

They ran swiftly down the hall with Lotor leading, his acute senses straining to hear and see as far ahead as he could. He knew well enough that if they were taken by surprise, that their chance of fighting would be drastically reduced. Allura followed with a blaster, which she had taken from one of the guards, cocked and ready to aid Lotor.

Following the passageway for sometime, it finally trifurcated and scowling, Lotor chose a random passage. Although he had been in the command centre before, he had been only to the upper floors where they had held council of war and other political matters. The Main Province was a place Lotor had avoided at all costs when he was part of the Empire since he had always loathed politics and his father had always looked after everything.

They continued on their route towards what they hoped was escape. Lotor wondered what was happening for Allura to be in the Main Complex, and prisoner to Admiral Mauld. Although he had been allowed to watch over her and Skathen, he had not been granted much more. He could catch brief glances of their lives and thus was ignorant of what was going on. He could deduce, however, that things had reached an extreme for Mauld to spend enough energy in capturing the Queen of Arus. The Admiral seldom involved himself in the missions unless he was up to an intrigue.

Have you not learned? Weren't those deaths enough for you, Lotor thought bitterly.

Even as alert as he was, and endowed with preternatural senses from his Doomite half, Lotor failed to notice the troupe of Drule guards coming to intercept their progress. He cursed creatively and posed the blade, growling low in his throat. Allura stood ready, blaster aimed and cocked. The Drule said something to them and Lotor responded with a snap. Allura, although she didn't understand the language, realised that whatever it was they had exchanged, was not for their favour. Unceremoniously, she fired.

Lotor startled, but recovered quickly and rushed forward to meet the onslaught of guards. They had been prepared for it and received the Prince with full attacks of their own. Lotor was astounded at their vivacity; he could hear Allura shooting whomever she could hit without jeopardising his position.

With the grace of a feline, he engaged the guards. The fight was brief, but not without its consequences. Lotor got a deep slash on his thigh and arm. Allura went to him and tried to bandage him.

"It's okay. The body will heal itself," he said quietly. "Give me only a few moments for the blood to stop flowing out." He panted.

"What do you mean, Lotor? I know your body will heal, but it's going to take time," Allura countered. "Let me at least wrap it up."

He shook his head. "Allura, I'm half Doomite. The Doomite body heals at a phenomenal rate. I think the ratio was one day for five human days. These are only flesh wounds. They will

probably be healed by the time we get out of here.” He paused. “Come, it’s obvious they know we have escaped. They’ll try and get us again. Now it’s a matter of stealth.” He looked up. “And I hope you’re not afraid of heights.”

“What do you mean?” Allura asked confused.

He smiled grimly. “Just follow me.”

Fluidly, he moved and took her by the waist. He hurled her up and before Allura could even cry out, she realised his intentions. She reached up and grabbed on the pipes, which formed a web close to the ceiling. Lotor was soon beside her, having propelled himself up. He swung his body acrobatically and straddled one of the pipes. He reached over and pulled her the rest of the way up.

“Ready?” he whispered.

She nodded, holding firmly to the pipe.

Lotor stood up and began to run across the pipes nimbly. Allura stared in awe and began to crawl slowly after him. Principally, it was not the fear of heights that kept her from scurrying across, but the fact that she did not trust her balance nor was she trained as Lotor had been. The latter soon realised this when he noticed that he was alone. He went back to Allura.

“Give me your hand. If you keep on going this way, it’s going to take you too long.”

“I can’t run like you.”

“You’ll find it that it’s not as hard as you think. But we’ll walk, until you feel more comfortable.” He grabbed her arms. “Cam’on, trust me. I would never let you fall. And if you do, I’ll fall under you to make it more comfortable.”

She nodded and stood up. She found that holding on to his arm, offered her a form of balance, and she moved a lot faster. Soon, true to his words, she was running. Allura realised that the pipes were wide and close enough to offer a good stepping ground and once her mind got accustomed to running over the ground, she found the travel rather easy. In fact, she could understand Skathen’s fascination with doing what most considered perilous. There was a thrill to it, and a sense of accomplishment once it was done.

Finally, after taking several wrong turns and coming to dead ends, Lotor managed to lead them to the outside. He chose an overgrown passage adjacent to the base and tried to clear as much of it as he could so that Allura could proceed with ease.

After an arduous and long journey, they reached a meadow and stopped by a stream. Lotor threw himself on the grass and dunked his head into the water, taking great satisfaction out of its coolness against his skin. Despite the limitations imposed by the body, he missed the form. He longed all the sensations it had brought and granted him. He raised his head and felt the water running from his hair and soaking into his uniform. Allura sat beside him, pulling her dress around her, since it had ripped when she had crashed through the bushes. She drank her fill as well, but not indulging as he had. When she finally looked at him, she smiled. Lotor looked almost like Skathen’s twin. His hair, which had always been slicked back, fell over his face, his long bangs obscuring one eye.

“I would like to thank you for taking care of the brat.” Lotor smiled fondly. “I have missed him. But I knew he could not be any better with anyone else. You have not proved me wrong.” He looked away. “I am also grateful to Keith. He has been very kind to Skathen and shown and given him nothing but love.”

“Keith loves him. There are times I believe he loves him more than his own daughter.”

Lotor nodded. “Keith, despite our differences, has always been a good man. I was too stubborn and proud to admit to this before. In fact, I have always admired his courage and determination.”

“In a way you’re of like minds.” Allura looked down and back at him. “But there are certain things I don’t think you can be compared at all.”

Lotor knitted his brow. “What do you mean?”

“There’s something I have denied all my life. Something that I have always wanted to say and never could because the chance was taken away from me.” Allura looked deep into his eyes. “I am given this chance again and I’m not going to pass it up.” She moved closer to him. “Lotor, I love you. Against reason, against logic, against time itself! I love you. Every year it gets stronger. Sometimes when I see Skathen from behind, I almost forget that it’s not you. It pains me.” She swallowed.

Lotor took her into his arms and kissed her deeply. Allura surrendered herself completely to him. Her primordial desires, passion and emotions taking complete control over her being. Even as intoxicated as she was by all of this, she could feel him surrendering himself to her just as completely. She realised then that there was no turning back. Any thought of Keith, Tiella or Arus would have to be forgotten. Or rather, they would be pushed away by the strength of the flood entering her from Lotor.

Their union was complete. Body, soul and emotions forged, making them into one. Any fear that Allura may have had of remembering the impact and consequences of her actions upon her personal life was abolished. There had been no space for anything else to intrude upon her union with Lotor. The latter, for his part, was just as overwhelmed as Allura. In all his life, he had never felt such passion and complete surrender from either his partner or himself. Even when they had shared a unity in Hansbach, they had held back and failed to become one as they were experiencing at that hour.

They lay in each other's arms, Allura asleep, exhausted by their clandestine meeting and Lotor's eyes half open, looking back towards the way of the Command Complex. He smiled subtly. Allura was safe in his arms. He was finally with his Princess.

Well, Queen now, he thought amused. All the same, she's still the same Allura. My Kitten... Age has granted her more beauty and wisdom. He sighed contentedly and realised that his time with Allura was almost at an end.

"Love?" he called gently, nudging her.

"Hum?" She opened her eyes slowly and smiled when she saw him.

"My time is nearing. Come, let us make haste."

They got up quickly and Allura donned her tattered clothes. Lotor put his shirt over her, which hung almost like a dress, to offer a bit more of protection. Allura smiled and Lotor took her hand, running back towards the base.

"Lotor! What are you doing?"

"We need a ship," he explained. "I figured the hangars would have been sealed off when we left. We may have a chance now."

Allura nodded and they continued on. They reached the base and Lotor quickly found a ventilation shaft. Allura looked at it suspiciously but did not argue when Lotor prompted her to enter. Together they began to make their way deep into it. Finally, the sight of a Nephillim rewarded them. Lotor and Allura disabled the few guards and they entered the robot quickly.

"Where to?" Lotor asked as he started the engines.

"Doom."

Lotor blinked at her but decided against questioning. There was much he did not know and he doubted that he had the time for Allura to explain it to him. With a shrug, he blasted the dock gates open and engaged all the engines, setting the Nephillim on its course towards his former home.

As they reached the Main's outer air space, Lotor noted that his mundane sojourn was due to conclude. He sighed heavily and went to Allura, holding her tightly.

"My time is here, my love. I must leave you."

Allura looked up and realised that he was right. His body was shrouded by the same ethereal glimmer, which had brought him to her. She looked pained and sad.

"Lotor! No! You can't leave me!" she cried, gripping to his, still, solid arms. "Please, don't go..." she pleaded. "No..."

"I cannot help this," Lotor admitted sadly. "You know, better than anyone else, that I don't want to leave you, my love. I want to be with you. This has always been my desire and wish. It was granted me but for a few hours. Now I am once again denied you." He paused. "I do not know what to expect once I have reached the aether. However, if it is possible to wait for you, then know that I will."

His body took an incorporeal form. Allura's hands closed into fists and she stared at his face, which looked sad, but at the same time content. At first this puzzled her and then she realised that she was also pleased. What they had shared had been far beyond the physical tryst she was used to. They had bound themselves to each other. Her few hours with him had been more fulfilling than she could remember. She smiled at him and saw him smile back at her. And

then the glimmer was nothing more than an insubstantial dim light until it faded completely from view.

“I love you...” she whispered and sat back down, waiting for the Nephillim to reach Doom.

“I have failed you,” Tiella said quietly, sitting on the cot.

Keith looked up slowly from the corner where he had crouched hiding his nakedness.

“Your mother has been targeted then.” He sounded strained.

Tiella nodded. “She is alive still. The Empire has captured her. Marzad is trying to locate her and we’re going to go after her.”

“The Empire has her?” Keith asked in disbelief.

“Yes, why?”

“Ahm...” Keith scowled.

The door opened and Marzad entered. “Knight Akira, what are your thoughts on the matter?”

“I thought I told you I wanted to speak with my father alone.” Tiella stood up angrily.

“And so you shall.” Marzad’s eyes glimmered, making Keith flinch involuntarily; something about Marzad disturbing him. “Right now, however, there are pieces that must be put together and only your father can supply me with the answers I seek.”

Tiella looked ready to retort, but sighed instead and sat back down, glaring at Marzad. Keith found it strange that she would submit so easily to the Drule, but figured he could ask questions later.

“A war will probably erupt because of it,” Keith said. “As soon as the Alliance finds out that Allura has been taken, they’ll not be pleased.”

“Why would the Empire do that?” Marzad crossed his arms. “I know that the Brotherhoods are linked. Why the double cross?”

“I can only guess that the Emperor wants to use Allura for some political reason. I don’t know what their tainted minds have come up with this time, but either way Allura is in great danger.” Keith paused. “Let me go to her rescue. I vow that I’ll come back here once I secure her safety.”

Marzad studied him briefly. “I do not doubt your words, Knight. However, it’s not my decision to grant you such freedom. I will take this to the King’s consideration and advise him that it would be a good idea to let you take the mission.”

“The job is mine,” Tiella half growled. “I failed. It’s up to me to fix it.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Keith reminded.

“And so am I,” Tiella retorted and stood up. “I don’t know what it will take to prove to you that I am capable of fending for myself. Perhaps you will learn it when you are faced with my wrath.” She left the room.

“Tiella!” Keith called after her.

Marzad raised an eyebrow and shook his head. “I have no doubt in her. I simply think this mission is suicidal.”

Keith scowled. “I see you’re not very concerned about me.”

“Just as you wouldn’t be with me,” Marzad retorted. “Besides I don’t feel towards you as I do about her. There’s a difference here.”

“So you two are still together,” Keith groaned.

“And I see you still don’t approve.” Marzad shrugged. “Tiella’s a lovely girl and I never thought I would ever grow fond of someone as I have...” He stopped, realising that he was divulging too much.

“Don’t hurt my daughter,” Keith warned, not at all pleased about his Tiella’s choice in lover.

“I have no intentions of hurting her.” Marzad blinked languidly. “At any rate, I will leave you now. I will bring your idea to the King and he will decide whether or not you’re to go to the rescue of the Queen.” Marzad left.

He made his way casually through the tunnels until he reached the castle and continued through the networks of passages until he reached the Main Hall. Assuring that the chamber was

devoid of life, he emerged and continued on his way towards Skathen's study to wait for his return from announcing to the citizens about the plans of moving underground.

As Marzad turned a corner, he was suddenly grabbed from behind and knocked down. He startled, more confused over the fact that his senses had not warned him of the attacker than actually being under a heavy body, pinned helplessly.

He saw a light flash, what he could only deduce to be a blade, and twisted his body. The dagger imbedded itself on the floor where his head had been moments before. Taking advantage of the struggle, he rolled and managed to scramble away from his attacker. He stood up quickly and was faced with a tall, for human standards, well toned, black haired man who now had a rifle cocked and pointed at him. Marzad knew that he would have to rely on his acrobatics and hoped to dodge the bullet.

The tableau remained for long moments. Marzad took into consideration every possible avenue to escape from the stranger. The latter seemed indifferent to the whole thing, simply waiting for Marzad to make the first move.

What happened next stunned Marzad quite profoundly. The stranger suddenly cried out, and the gun fired. Marzad dodged enough for the bullet not to hit him vitally but he grunted as it entered deep into his shoulder. The stranger fell to the floor heavily, and Marzad finally saw the knife stuck to his shoulder. He looked up at the direction it had come only to be startled again by Tiella who jumped down from the rafters behind him.

"It's a good thing one of us is alert," she said simply, extending her hand towards her knife. The magnetic mechanism responded and the blade returned to her hand. "I learn a lot by just watching," she continued conversationally. "I decided to use poison on my knives as well. I wasn't sure how well it would work, but I guess this was a good test." She began to walk away. "Oh, and remember to take the cyanide pill from his mouth."

Marzad stood, mouth agape, staring at her retreating form, before he laughed and moved the stranger to one of the holding cells.

Skathen looked annoyed. "Sven..." He shook his head. "But why was he after you?"

Marzad shrugged. "Maybe they think I'm an awful influence on you and want me out of the picture. Or, as I have stated before, casualties of war."

"There's more to this. I think we bit more than we could chew."

The door opened admitting Tiella and Keith. He was dressed and ready to leave for Allura's rescue. Skathen sighed loudly when he saw Keith, his heart constricting in pain.

"I trust your promise was not hollow. I have never known you to lie," Skathen stated.

"I would never lie to you or do anything to betray you," Keith responded simply. "If only you were willing to listen rather than succumb to whatever your grievous fantasies have conjured, you'd already know this."

"I'm entitled to feel as I wish."

"What you feel is self pity and it's corroding your mind. You have nothing else besides your pain. In fact you wouldn't know how to live if someone took that away from you. If your father came back and you were taken away from this mess to live happy wherever you wanted, you would simply die because you can't understand anything else besides pain. You seem to relish on its very presence."

"Perhaps I do," Skathen said. "But this is not something I desire to debate on."

"As you wish," Keith responded. "I'm tired of trying to show you how much I love you. Quite frankly, King Skathen, I give up."

Skathen felt like he had been slapped on the face and his heart torn out of his chest. "Your mission awaits you. From all Marzad has been able to find, Queen Allura is in on the Main." He turned to Tiella. "Please, come back to me."

Tiella nodded resolutely. "I love you, my brother."

"As I do you, my sister. May the gods watch over you."

Before anything else could be said, the alarms went off. Marzad switched on the view screen and they saw as a Nephillim entered Eighteen's atmosphere.

"Identify yourself," Marzad hailed.

"Link me to King Skathen D'ssat," a voice called.

“Allura!” Keith called.

“Keith?”

“Mother!” Tiella and Skathen cried together.

“Prepare rescue units,” Skathen told Tiella. “Marzad, plot her course and see where she will be landing.” He paused. “Your Majesty, I’ll grant you the opportunity to greet your wife, however, I expect you back in your cell after that.”

Keith locked his jaw. “As you wish, Your Highness.” He bowed mockingly, anger stirring the remaining stump of a corrupt persona he had once hosted.

Skathen turned away, controlling his anger.

Tiella, who had gone with the rescue team to greet her mother, brought Allura into the Castle. Skathen and Keith startled visibly when they saw what Allura was wearing. They exchanged glances, completely forgetting about their hostility and remained in quiet shock.

Allura seemed unaware of the cause of the effect she had on them. She scowled and put her hands on her hips. “Well, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Where did you get that shirt?” Keith and Skathen asked simultaneously.

Allura’s eyes widened and she looked down slowly at herself. She had meant to take off the shirt and hide it in the Nephillim, but in the confusion of the rescuing, she had forgotten all about it.

“Ahm... I found it somewhere,” she said lamely.

“Only one person ever wore that style of uniform,” Keith said simply.

“And we both know that he’s dead!” she remarked upset. “Keith, what do you think I did? Summoned some ghost and stole and his shirt?”

Skathen wanted to laugh at that and noticed that Marzad had turned around to hide his own amusement. “Mother, how are you?” Skathen asked. “We were about to go to your rescue. I trust you were treated with at least some decency.”

Allura nodded. “The Drule were rough, but they didn’t harm me. I managed to escape a few hours ago and came here since I didn’t know if the Nephillim would make it back to Arus and because I know the Alliance Knights are out to kill me.” She cast Keith a withering look.

Keith swallowed visibly.

“You’ll find a safe harbour here,” Skathen stated. “At least for some time. I don’t doubt that the Alliances are going to come over and rage war on Eighteen, but until then you’ll be safe. You’ll have me, Tiella and Marzad. One of us will always be with you.”

Allura nodded. “Why are they targeting me?” she asked Keith. “What do I have to do with all of this?” She crossed her arms.

“Because I wouldn’t kill Skathen,” Keith replied with a sigh. “They have sent me twice and both times I have failed.” He paused. “Well, I would have failed if I hadn’t been captured.” He gave Tiella an annoyed look. “I came here to warn Skathen of the danger and the Alliance knew, so they made preparations to send Knights after you and Tiella. As to why the Rooks have moved against you, it is quite beyond me.”

“Then maybe you can tell me this,” Marzad said suddenly. “Why was Prime Minister Sven Erickson of Pollux sent to kill me?”

“He was?” Keith asked in shock.

Tiella nodded. “I caught him too.” She looked meaningfully at Marzad. “After Marzad took a bullet on his arm because he couldn’t fend for himself.”

Skathen raised an amused eyebrow at Marzad. “Accident?”

“Oh shut up,” Marzad said grudgingly. “Many thanks, Princess Tiella of Arus, you saved my meaningless life.” He bowed.

“Oh stuff it,” Tiella snapped.

Keith shook his head. “Look, I don’t know why Sven, of all people, was sent to Play you,” he admitted. “Sven hasn’t Played in so long, I suspected they had simply forgotten he existed. I can rightly guess that he’s not willing to talk.”

“Aye, I can understand if he was sent against me.” Skathen paused thoughtfully. “But perhaps he was supposed to hit me as well, after he removed Marzad.” He shrugged and turned

to Keith. "Your Majesty, I will grant you time to spend with mother. I'll send Marzad to escort you back to your cell." He left with Tiella and Marzad.

Keith moved towards Allura to hug her, but instead of receiving the warm hug he would have normally gotten, Allura was hesitant and held back.

He sighed. "Okay, you've got to tell me what is going on."

Allura pulled away, arms akimbo. "Excuse me?! You tell me what's going on!" she demanded. "First you take off then I get kidnapped and then I discover you are part of some mafia! You have a lot to explain, buster." She narrowed her eyes.

"First of all, I didn't just take off, and I already told you why I left. Second, it's not a mafia it's called a Brotherhood and there's nothing I can tell you that you probably haven't already figured out!" Keith huffed. "Now you explain how you came to be wearing Lotor's shirt! And don't tell me it was just lying around the ship!"

Allura looked ready to cause Keith some serious bodily violence. "Listen up, King Keith Akira-Førstenheüser, you had no right to hide all this from me!" she snapped. "You had no right to have kept such secret from me. Imagine! Going around the universe killing people! You should be ashamed of yourself. And now listen to you, defending those..." She growled. "Those creatures!" She hissed a sigh. "I thought we had no secrets from each other! You have kept this from me all my life, how dare you?!" She stomped her foot down angrily. "And how dare you question me about a lousy, fringed shirt?!"

"I had no choice!" Keith retorted. "Besides I haven't gone around killing people since I got to Arus!" Keith lied, forgetting about the missions for the Black Circle*. And you've got a lot of nerve going on about keeping secrets and all!" Keith snarled. "I'm surprised you didn't snatch Lotor's mini-skirt!"

Allura looked affronted. "At least he's got the legs to show!" She stormed away.

"Not anymore, he's dead remember!" Keith yelled, exasperated. "Why don't you just admit it? You love that idiot and not me! I'm just the flavour of the week, right?!"

"It only took you seventeen years to figure that out," Allura spat.

At that, Keith found that he had to sit down. "No it didn't," he said.

Allura sighed and crossed her arms. "I didn't mean that. I'm just very angry. I never knew about this horrible secret of yours and I just had an unpleasant sojourn on the Main Province. I'm tired, Keith. Very tired. I just want this all to end. I want Skathen back in Arus and all of us together again like it used to be."

"How can you say that?!" Keith cried. "Nothing is ever going to be the same! Skathen's gone pretty much bonkers, Tiella's going through puberty again and you won't be happy unless Lotor magically comes back to life and takes over my stud services."

Allura arched an eyebrow, thinking that this would not be such a bad idea. "Keith if you're so unhappy, well, it's not my fault. I'm not the one who decided to move against Skathen playing your stupid mafia games." She sighed. "You know well enough how good he is."

"Look, going after Skathen was not my choice, okay? I only took the job on because I'm the only one stupid enough to stall like that. I don't want Skathen dead, why doesn't anyone understand that?" Keith crossed his arms, visibly annoyed. "Princess, I'm really sorry that I didn't tell you about the Knight's Club. I was scared that someone would find out and then you'd be dead, can you blame me for that?"

"Did it change anything in the long run? I almost did end up dead. If it wasn't for..." She looked startled. "There was an accident and I got away."

Keith raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Allura, I've known you for over twenty years. I know you better than you'd believe. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that I can tell when you're lying."

She sighed deeply. "You're right. I am lying."

"So? What happened?" Keith asked flatly.

"Keith, I was in a holding cell..." She looked down, hugging herself. "Lotor suddenly appeared and when the guards came to check on me he broke his way out. I just followed him until we got to a ship. He then left." She paused. "As to why I have his shirt, well, my dress was pretty ripped and he gave it to me."

"Ghosts... They just love you, don't they? First your father and now Lotor," Keith commented. "So nothing else happened, right?" He looked hopefully at her.

“Ahm...” Allura backed off a step. “Nothing bad...” she offered lamely. “Keith, please, listen, why don’t we just forget about all of this, honey?” She looked at him, cocking her head. “I just want to forget all of this ever happened. I have missed you so much. You have been gone for so long...”

“No, you didn’t miss me,” Keith stated, his eyes downcast. “Allura, stop lying to me, alright?”

Allura sighed. “Fine. Keith, Lotor and I... Well, things happened. I wanted it just as much as he did. I don’t regret it. I won’t lie to you anymore. I will say this, however, I do love you.”

Keith remained silent for a moment. “How could you let that man do that to you?”

Allura looked the picture of injured innocence. “Well, he’s not really a man anymore, is he?”

“Have you totally forgotten what Lotor was like?” Keith glared at Allura, clearly hurt by everything that was being revealed. “How could you feel love for that monster?”

“I don’t know!” she rebuked angrily. “I just do. Probably because he was everything I ever wanted on a man. I don’t truly believe he was the monster he pretended to be. You saw how he was with Skathen!”

“Hitler loved his pet dog and he nearly decimated the Jews!” Keith snapped.

It was obvious that the situation was frustrating him intensely. He immediately realised that he would live to regret his reactionary comment. Allura shook in anger and dove at Keith all nails and fists. As she was about to connect, Keith dodged her and she landed heavily on the steps leading up to the throne. She remained still, stunned at his sudden reaction until she finally turned her head to face him. She locked her jaw, keeping back tears of pain.

“Get away from me, Keith,” she warned quietly. “I don’t ever want to see you again.” She got up slowly, purposely not showing him that she was favouring her right leg, although the pain was barely tolerable. “Skathen!” she called towards the door through which he had left.

Keith grabbed Allura by the wrist, whirling her around, catching her as she cried out, her leg collapsing from under her. “Allura, please. I’m sorry. I love you very much.”

He stopped, as Allura clawed him across his face as he made the last statement. Keith flinched, and pushed Allura to the floor. He pinned her, holding her wrists with one hand, his other hand clamped over her mouth to stop her from screaming.

Allura squirmed and bit his hand trying to free herself. Keith pulled his hand away in an involuntary reaction and Allura took the opportunity to scream and struggle harder trying to free herself.

“Allura, please, shut up for a second and listen to me!” Keith looked down at her. “I love you, okay? You can’t possibly imagine how much. The fact that you let that scum come near you just tears me up inside. I’ve lived all this time knowing that you love Lotor and that I was just something to keep you distracted, but the idea that Lotor came back from the dead, to have another one-night stand with you...”

Before Keith could continue, he was faced with a sword encased by laser. Keith looked up Rue’s length before finally meeting Skathen’s hollow and cold eyes. Glancing back at the sword, the very blade Lotor had lost when they had first battled, and seeing none of Skathen’s jovial demeanour, made Keith think of Lotor even more.

“Stand up, Knight,” Skathen commanded emotionlessly. “And I advise you maintain your actions guarded, I will not hesitate to defend the Queen.”

Keith sighed, and rolled off Allura before standing up. Marzad was suddenly behind him, holding his arm, as tears began to flow freely from Keith’s face. He snatched his arm away from Marzad, glaring at him. Marzad turned to Skathen who just shrugged and helped Allura to her feet.

“Take him back to the cell,” Skathen ordered.

Allura pulled away from Skathen and limped over at Keith. “You are the monster. At least Lotor would have never embarrassed me by pinning me down as you did and hurting me.” She kicked him hard.

Keith fell to the floor heavily, grasping the area that Allura had inflicted the latest injury upon. Marzad looked down with a sympathetic eyebrow raised.

Keith eventually regained his equilibrium. “Allura, I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Allura looked regally at him before turning to Skathen. "Would you escort me to my chambers? I am very weary and wish to rest."

Skathen bowed and took her hand. "Of course, mother."

"I love you," Keith said.

Allura's eyes, as she walked away, filled with tears, but she kept her head high. Marzad then motioned for Keith to follow him.

"Accident?" Marzad enquired casually.

Surprisingly, Keith managed a weak smile. "If it was only that. Unfortunately I'm not allowed Skathen's excuse for my stupidity."

Allura entered the room Skathen had reserved for her. She sat on the bed heavily and sighed. Skathen poured her water and brushed her hair back gently.

"I can send a medic in for you," he offered quietly. "I know you're hurt, even if you won't admit it."

Allura made it as if to protest but nodded instead. "Yes, please do." She sighed again. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

Skathen shrugged indifferently. "I'm sorry it had to happen. I only hope that everything is okay with you," he said truthfully. "I was very worried about you. When Tiella returned and told me you had been captured, I feared the worse. And as everything stands, Eighteen is too weak to fight the Empire."

"They were rough, but they did not hurt me. Mauld can be surprisingly gentle." She looked deep into his eyes. "Skay, when did this madness start? How did it all begin?"

"With me doing stupid things." He let out a frustrated breath. "With me going around the universe not realising the impact that my actions would have on those around me." He went to the window. "Mother, all I ever wanted to do was to be part of a patrol and fight the Empire along side the Alliance. That's it really. But I knew I would never be happy until I vaulted my grandfather, thus avenging my father. I came here the first time to learn about my enemy and I did. Suddenly, I was thrown onto a throne and everything began to corrode away." He paused. "I never wanted to hurt Key. I never wanted you to be captured, I never wanted to expose Tiella to the danger she's now involved. Even Marzad has been thrown into a fight he can't possibly win."

"Say it Skathen. You'll feel better."

He punched the wall in front of him. "It was all a bloody accident!" he cried out in both pain and aggravation.

Allura nodded. "Let me tell you something, Skay. Since you were brought to us, everyone knew that you would be the catalyst in a change. No one knew what you would do exactly, but we all knew that whatever your action was to be, would send ripples of change throughout the galaxy."

"How did you know that?" he asked in awe, nursing his bleeding hand.

Allura shrugged. "I don't truly know. I guess because of the way fate dealt you the cards. Lotor was lost at the end of the war the Alliance raged on Arus. He had lost everyone he had loved and he went completely mad. Even his aunt, Keith's mother, died in front of him. When he recommenced the attacks on Arus, under his father's orders, he was hollow and dead. The man he had once been was not there anymore. The shell followed orders and travelled a path already set. Yet, he was willing to defy everything for you and he recovered. When I met him again, when he moved to Arus to secure your safety, he was almost his old self again. You cured him."

"He came back for you," Skathen remarked acrimoniously.

Allura sighed. "I did not call for him."

"I'm not placing the blame on you."

"But you're resentful," Allura stated.

Skathen sighed deeply. "Mother, I'm certain that you don't condemn me for my bitterness. Why did he not come to me?" he demanded frustrated. "I'm glad that he did save you, but I would have liked to see him one last time. I need his forgiveness!"

Allura realised that Skathen was about to expose the reason for the torment that had tortured him all his life and given him the dark disposition he had always sported. The reason for

the profound unhappiness he had been feeling since his father's death. Her heart beat faster in expectation.

"Forgiveness for what?" she queried quietly.

"He died because of me." Skathen closed his eyes. "It was my fault."

Allura's jaw fell open. She shook her head trying to regain her balance. "What are you talking about? It wasn't your fault at all!"

Skathen nodded. "I was the one who made him take out Mourn that day. If it weren't for me, he would never have gone out. If I hadn't been aboard the ship, he would have been able to escape." He looked anguished. "It was a great, big, fat accident!" He punched the wall again and cried out.

Allura rushed to him. "Skathen stopped saying foolishness!" She held him gently.

He pulled away. "It's the truth!" he argued. "It's all my fault he died."

"And you have borne this cross all your life because you believe yourself to be guilty!" She crossed her arms. "All these years I have wondered what made you so sad and now I see it was just a misunderstanding in your part."

"There was no misunderstanding! I killed him!"

Allura slapped him across the face. "Stop this non-sense!" she snapped.

Skathen looked stunned at her. "But..."

"But nothing!" she rebuked angrily. "As you have said, what happened was an accident. Lotor had a suspicion that something was happening to Mourn and that's probably why she was unable to withstand the heavy attack she suffered. Besides, the Doomites came prepared with several mega missiles. Your father did what he thought was right and saved you. Don't blame yourself for his death. He took you on the ship because he wanted to. I understand that he spoiled you to no end, but Lotor was his own man and he could control you even if that idea seems impossible. He did what he wanted to. Don't blame yourself."

Skathen sighed loudly. "It doesn't matter anymore..."

Allura witnessed as another part of Skathen died. "No, please, Skathen..." she pleaded softly.

"He betrayed me."

"No! Please, no!" Allura's eyes welled with tears. "He did not betray you. He loves you."

Skathen shrugged. "Not enough to see me." He began to leave.

She grabbed his arm. "Skathen, listen to me! Your father didn't leave you. He came to me because I needed him. I know that you miss him, but your needs are different, please understand that. Don't judge him for something that is not his fault, just as you should not blame yourself for his death. Stop living in misery. Think about everyone else around you. Think of the good things in life.

He sighed. "Mother, I wish to be alone now. I'll see you at supper." He left the room.

Allura collapsed into the bed and began to cry. Pain constricted her heart whenever she thought of Keith and Skathen.

Mauld blinked in a calculative matter at the soldier who stood before him sweating and licking his lips nervously. The Admiral crossed his arms, his pose commanding and malign, although his purple eyes were smiling and held a mischievous glint.

"Let me get this straight..." Mauld began slowly. "The Queen of Arus escaped from the high security cell, she defeated all of the guards who were sent to stop her and then she high-jacked a Nephillim and finally left the planet without being traced." He arched an eyebrow.

"Sire..." The soldier said nervously. "She had help from someone else. She didn't fight alone."

"Oh, I see..." Mauld leered. "So someone came in, got the Queen out, defeated the guards, stole a Nephillim and got away... That really makes all the difference!" He narrowed his eyes. "Are you questioning my intelligence?"

"Ahm... sire..." The soldier suppressed a shudder. "According to everyone who fought the stranger and lived to see, it was Prince Lotor of Doom."

Mauld blinked slowly. "Now you are really trying my patience!" he snapped.

“Sire, here are the chips from the cameras that caught the escape. You can see for yourself.” The soldier knitted his brow. “I believed the Prince to be dead.”

“He is, you moron!” Mauld punched him hard across the face, the Claws in the vambraces of his gauntlets extended. “And regardless of who t’was that rescued the Queen, you all fail’d miserably at stopping them! A female and a single man, and all of my highly trained guards allowed them to escape, then could not catch them, and finally permitted them to get away with one of the Nephillims!” He paused. “Send Captain Gran’nam to me.” He turned and left, indifferent to howls of pain from the guard.

He reached the war room shortly after and was not surprised to find Gran’nam already waiting for him. The Drule Captain was odd looking with pale azure skin, red eyes and a shock of white hair that cascaded down his back.

“Admiral, you requested my presence,” Gran’nam called smoothly.

“Tell me, Captain, howe’er did the Queen escape? I thought you saw to it that your troupes were well trained and capable of handling a single female. True enough she has received training in combats, howe’er, she did not strike me as being anything extraordinary; especially against an army of men.”

“Another came to help her,” Gran’nam reported. “I don’t know who he was, only that he resembles the late Prince of Doom.”

“That is irrelevant. Even if it had been the Prince, it still does not explain how they escaped. There were only two of them in the most secure compound in the Dark Ring.” Mauld crossed his arms. “What you are telling me is that you are unskilled and we have incompetents for soldiers and guards. This event is inexcusable.”

Gran’nam nodded, knowing that arguing with Mauld was quite pointless. “Sir, I’m still investigating the events. I don’t know what method they used to escape or how they were not detected and able to get away. The soldiers in charge of monitoring the Queen can’t offer an explanation as to where the male came from. The way to her cell was heavily guarded and he was within the cell when the door was first opened after she was placed within. As you know, all the doors have counters with timers. I’ve already checked into that. The first time the door opened after she was put in the cell, was when the male was found. And believe me, no one had gone in with her.”

Mauld’s eyes glimmered with amusement. “So what you believe is that the male who assisted her, was the ghost of Prince Lotor.”

“I would not be so foolish to say such a thing. Even so, for a ghost, he left some pretty solid evidence. I have lost several of my men.” Gran’nam shook his head. “That male was no ghost. He was real enough and he got the Queen out of here.”

“Treachery then,” Mauld stated. “One of your men betrayed you.”

Gran’nam shook his head. “I don’t know what happened earlier, Admiral. As I have said, I’m looking into it. All I know right now is that the male was within the cell with her. However, I was there when she was put in, and she was alone. I don’t recognise the male at all, and the pictures supplied by the chips identify him as Prince Lotor of Doom. He is, however, dead.”

Mauld nodded. “Captain, I will give you twelve hours to come up with a convincing excuse,” he said sardonically. “Remember that the excuse has to be good enough to please His Excellency. I am only the informant.” He paused. “If I had my way, I would execute the lot of you for being so inept.”

Gran’nam nodded. “As you wish, sire. I will seek you again in twelve hours.” He left the room.

Mauld watched him go. Although unappreciative of the fact that Gran’nam did not offer him complete respect, he would never dispose of the Captain of the Emperor’s armada and Ksiel’s pilot. He was the best warrior Mauld had found and a strong commander. Gran’nam was also quite ambitious and Mauld knew he wanted to become Admiral and the Emperor’s Advisor. He would strive for that title and try and avoid mistakes.

Fool, Mauld thought unconcernedly. Do you really think His Excellency would replace me with you or anyone else within the Dark Ring for that matter? He shook his head, his eyes dancing with amusement. But who am I to shatter other’s dreams? And who am I to stop you from doing an excellent job? He smiled pleased. Besides, if the young King continues on this perilous

path he has chosen, I may very well have to forfeit my existence and you will be graced with my position.

“Sire, communication incoming from the Galaxy Alliance,” a monotone voice announced.

“Patch it through,” Mauld commanded and waited. “Greetings Space Marshal Graham,” he saluted. “Tis rare for you to call upon me.”

“You know well enough why I’m calling to you,” Graham snapped acidly. “Why were the Drule sent to Arus to kidnap the Queen?”

“That does not concern you,” he replied. “All is fair in war... Or have you forgotten that detail?”

“Admiral, where’s the Queen now?” Graham demanded.

Mauld tapped a slender finger against his chin. “I honestly do not know.”

Graham narrowed his eyes. “I’m quite sick of your taunts, Admiral. For years we have defended ourselves from your petty attacks. This changes today.” He shut off the communication.

Mauld smiled subtly. “Come to me for a change, Alliance. You shall be surprised!”

He then heard all the doors and windows lock themselves. He blinked slowly knowing what the implication of the action meant. He turned around and bowed low.

“My Lord.”

“Mauld, I see everything is going as planned,” Zheppo said entering the room through a secret passageway. “Although I don’t rightly understand how the Queen escaped.” He raised his brow. “It seems to have been a strange occurrence...”

Mauld snorted. “All the reports I have received are accusing a ghost as the reason for the escape. I do not know if I want to flog this Complex to death or commit them all to a hospice.”

Zheppo chuckled. “It’s not so important.”

“Sire, t’is important simply because if we had not desired the Queen to escape, then this proves to us that we are surrounded by a phalanx of unskilled dogs. I do not want to rely on men who cannot do their job.”

“Admonish the proper punishment for their failure,” Zheppo commanded indifferently. “Remember, only you and I know of the plan. As far as everyone is concerned, she was supposed to remain here...” He paused. “Have you been able to track her destination yet?”

“I am assuming Eighteen, since none of the Nephillims were reconditioned to carry her such a distance and the boy is there; howe’er, I do not have any proof to support this suspicion.”

“Very well. Continue then. Assemble all forces and let us prepare a proper welcome party for the Alliance when they get here. I don’t want to disappoint them.” Zheppo left as he had entered.

Mauld watched him go before turning around. The locks clicked again, announcing that he was free to leave the room once more.

* “Black Circle” still unwritten.