

Warning: Sexual innuendo, violence, angst.

A Network of Intrigues

Marzad entered the castle to find it in a state of mayhem. He looked around briefly before grabbing a guard by the collar.

“Where’s the King?” he demanded.

“He’s dead,” the guard replied.

“What?!”

Tossing the guard aside roughly, Marzad ran to the chambers Skathen had taken for his own. He entered the room and found it vacant. He locked his jaw, a lump forming in his throat. He ran back out and grabbed a different guard.

“Where’s the King? Where has he been taken?”

The guard looked startled at Marzad. “Sire, no one knows of him. Word is out that he has been assassinated.”

Marzad shook his head and ran off again, this time to the cells. He skidded to a stop upon entering Griefe’s vast hangar and seeing Skathen on the floor in a tarn of dried blood. Mourn was still firmly imbedded on the floor, glowing a soft red; blood also staining the simple-looking blade.

“Skathen!” Marzad hissed rushing to him.

To his relief, he found Skathen still alive, if barely. He locked his jaw and looked around. His eyes narrowed upon seeing Keith’s cell empty and the door ajar. He picked up Skathen gently and took him aboard Griefe, where he would be more comfortable and he could tend to Skathen’s wounds.

“Don’t you dare leave me,” Marzad scolded Skathen’s unconscious form. “You can’t just leave me like this. I mean it.”

Once satisfied with the dressing job he had done on Skathen, he moved to the communication panel, entering a simple code.

“My, my... That was rather quick,” Mauld said tapping a gloved, slender finger against his chin.

“The King has been hit,” Marzad explained. “A Knight took him out.”

Mauld scowled. It was apparent that he was not pleased by the news.

“He will recover,” Marzad affirmed determinedly. *Even if I have to open my veins for him and feed him with the Blood.* “It will, however, be a matter of time. I can’t foresee when.”

Mauld nodded. “I cannot just sit here and wait for your King to wake up.”

Marzad locked his jaw. “I will offer you harbour, if you promise to simply remain in the quarters offered you. You’ll also find the facilities to repair Fury.”

“And what is the price?” Mauld looked amused.

“None, Mauld.” Marzad stated. “You trusted me enough to allow me come and see to Skathen. I’m going to repay the kindness and let you touch down and repair.”

“Touching,” Mauld replied ironically. “Transmit the co-ordinates. Fury will reach Doom in T-minus two hours.” He closed the circuits.

Doom? Marzad scowled. I’ve always heard that he let things slip every now and then. Is he trying to tell me that what he said was true? That he indeed wants to see this planet converted back to what it was?

Mauld stepped out of Fury and looked up at Griefe which sat beside his black dreadnaught. Griefe was not unlike Mourn, its predecessor, only it was bigger and its weaponry more offensive and optimised. Most of the aft of the ship was heavily damaged and the top of its conning tower missing. Mauld blinked in a calculative manner before looking back at Fury comparing the spoil.

Before he could say anything else, Tiella exited Fury just as Marzad entered the dock from the control room. She rushed into his arms.

“Where’s Skay?”

“He’s resting,” Marzad answered. “He’s aboard.” He motioned towards Griefe. Mauld used their distraction to his advantage. *Are you as your sisters were? I do not know you.*

No... I am not someone you would like to know. Mauld knitted his brow not recognising the pattern of empathy pulsing from the ship. It did not possess the child-like feel Satyr, Mourn and the two Dirges had. Griefe felt ... old.

I puzzle you.

You are not as the others.

They are gone. They taught me much before they were extinguished from life. I have lived here and captured the pulses from other entities housing around me.

Mauld nodded and suddenly laughed as he understood the implications behind the exchange he had had with the ship. Marzad startled and looked at him curiously.

“Has the ship chosen one yet?” Mauld asked casually.

“What do you mean?” Marzad asked confused.

“Ah yes, of course you do not know the history behind this magnificent piece of machinery.” Mauld’s eyes swept the length of the ship. “Marzad, these ships are Psions.”

Marzad regarded Mauld as if he had lost his mind completely.

Mauld smirked. “Then I suppose it did not choose you. Pity.” He turned to re-board Fury.

“Rue did,” Marzad admitted. “It talked to me and... well... it pretty much piloted itself on that fight we had.”

Mauld stopped and looked askance at him over his shoulder. “Interesting...”

“Marzad! He’s dying!” Tiella rushed out of Griefe.

Marzad panicked and ran into Griefe after her. Mauld eyes flicked and a violent tendril left him seeking the life form in the ship. To his surprise, it bounced off a silver shield, which sent him a few paces back.

Let me through, Griefe, Mauld commanded. I must find the boy. T’is for his best interest.

Do not hurt my chosen, Grief warned.

Mauld nodded, and smiled lightly at the intelligence granted him. Again the violet tendril did its Psionic sweep. It located the weakest life form and Mauld’s eyes flickered once more. The world became washed by an intense purple as he performed a Dimension Slide, and soon found himself beside Skathen.

“Now to help you, youngling. You must not die. The universe will become dreadfully boring again.” Mauld smiled. *Besides, I have grown quite fond of you... and I did swear I would allow no harm to befall you.*

Violet eyes flickered anew in the spectrum. Powers bent and reshaped forming a Healing surge and slowly the purple current, visible only to the eyes of a Psion, left Mauld and entered Skathen, gradually merging into him and beginning to mend his wound.

Marzad and Tiella skidded to stop as they entered the bunk. Mauld stood staring intently at Skathen who shifted sporadically in his stupor. Tiella made to move towards Mauld, but Marzad held her arm, stopping her. His eyes, flickering in the red spectrum, could see what Mauld was doing. Tiella regarded Marzad briefly before freeing her arm.

“Let them be,” Marzad said quietly. “He’s helping Skathen.”

“Are you sure?”

Marzad nodded.

“What’s this? No Mauld?” Lord Argos asked sardonically as he entered the room.

Captain Quarq, the Prime Minister of the Rooks, blinked languidly and did not grace Argos with an answer. “Abbot, it seems one of the Bishops has defected.”

Bÿsmann looked thoughtful. “I have received the reports,” he said quietly. “What does the Brotherhood council?”

“His Excellency wishes to see him terminated,” Quarq pointed out. “But that’s his view.”

“And yours, Prime Minister?”

“Is he still reliable? Is he still a member of the Abbey?”

“Interesting questions ... I cannot, however, answer them. I have not been in contact with him for quite sometime.” Bÿsmann paused. “Insofar, he has given me no reason to list him as defected. His actions against the Empire do not weigh against him in the Monastery.”

“Then you deny sending him after Saint Lawrence?” Lord Troy snapped.

Bÿsmann scowled. “I beg your pardon?”

Argos exhaled a thick cloud of smoke from his cigar. “We have learned that Impruss has captured Saint Lawrence, though we still remain ignorant as to how.”

“This intelligence was not known to me. I know Mauld broke away from the Empire when he failed to follow the orders given him. However, I did not know he had targeted a Knight.”

“Oh, there is much more to this.” Troy leered at the Abbot and Prime Minister, clearly satisfied that the Lords were in possession of all vital information. “Knight Akira has escaped from Province Eighteen and has reported that the Queen’s Nite Club is, in fact, only two members. Marzad does the paper work and the hacking. A Queen captures the Pieces.”

“You honestly hadn’t guessed that?” Quarq asked flatly. “I suppose the name didn’t clue you in?”

“The assumption was that Marzad was doing all the work,” Argos protested.

“Queen’s Nite Club. Unless this Marzad is a freak, he cannot be a Queen,” Bÿsmann shrugged under the glower. “Therefore it had to be a woman.”

Troy glared odiously at them.

“And who, pray tell, is this Queen? Or do you not possess this intelligence?” Quarq asked in a mocking, sweet tone.

“Princess Tiella Amselle-Akira of Arus,” Argos confessed, his shoulders slumped. “Apparently, she’s quite good too. She captured Akira, Sven Erickson and every other Piece that’s gone missing. We suspect that she was hunting for Saint Lawrence as well.”

“And Mauld?” Bÿsmann arched an eyebrow.

“She was probably going to leave him for last, given his position in the Empire,” Quarq speculated. “It’s not exactly easy to infiltrate into the Main and kidnap a Psion who also happens to be the top Bishop.”

“Ah, yes... Another one of Impruss’ many quirks...” Troy looked amused. “It’s little wonder he’s so difficult to deal with.”

“All this chatter is fine, but what is the purpose of this meeting?” Bÿsmann suddenly queried. “I grow weary of your company and I cannot leave the Abbey for so long.”

“Bishop Impruss’ termination,” Argos rebuked, reminding the Abbot needlessly. “He defected. It’s time to remove him from the Board.”

Bÿsmann’s perfect lips curved into a smile. “And what says you, Prime Minister Quarq?” Quarq remained quiet.

“Then it is obvious to me that you’re using the Brotherhood as an excuse to eliminate a threat upon your Galaxy.” Bÿsmann stood up and looked down at the Lords. “You do well to fear Mauld. He is a deadly opponent and quite vicious, despite his easy and soft looks. I cannot, however, concur to his termination without just reasons. If you fear his attack upon the Earth’s Colonies, that is your own problem. As a Bishop, he has not defected.”

“He has been serving the Drule!” Troy snapped. “He’s abandoned the Outer Rim Territories to pledge himself to the Dark Ring!”

“Indeed he has. He knew he would never achieve much by remaining in the Outer Rim. He chose his career in life and moved. Relocation is not an unknown word to you, is it, Lord Troy?” Bÿsmann mocked.

“So what do you propose we do?”

“I will contact Mauld and ask him about his plans for the youngling,” Bÿsmann stated.

“Saint Lawrence is no youngling!” Troy snarled.

“Ah, yes, the flaw of the humans: always equating life spans to your own. You took Saint Lawrence in as a mere babe. He is of a species with a long life span. He is still only an adolescent. You have no idea how damaging your recruitment of him has been. Your predecessors knew much more than you and they treated him well.” Bÿsmann raised a thin, white eyebrow. “To my eyes, you are all pups. After you have reached over half of a millennium of life, everyone is a youngling. Even the Drule are toddlers compared to some of us.” He paused. “I wish you a good day.”

“Abbot, I demand the return of Knight Saint Lawrence.” Argos’ eyes twitched with anger as he spoke.

“And if Mauld refuses?”

“We are powerless to deploy any more Pieces. Our best have been captured and the Bishops are too good. We’ll not send men to die.”

Bÿsmann pondered over the information. “If Mauld refuses to co-operate I will deploy a Bishop to retrieve Saint Lawrence...”

“You have such power?” Argos’ asked acidly.

Bÿsmann looked to one of the wall panels. “Would you join us?” he called to it.

The panel slid up, and a tall, shapely woman, clad in a black dress stepped out. Her shimmering blue eyes swept across the room taking every face in, before she stopped beside the Abbot. The gathered men, except for Bÿsmann, were almost ready to bow at her feet in worship. The Knights’ Lords felt somewhat intimidated by her cool demeanour, but were enthralled nevertheless.

“I present you with Vulpes D’ssat my second best Bishop.”

“D’ssat?” Troy asked flatly.

“The very same. King Skathen D’ssat of Province Eighteen’s aunt.” Bÿsmann paused. “If Mauld refuses to give in by my request, Vulpes will go to the rescue of your Knight. Keep in mind, however, that Mauld will not be terminated.”

“What he has done...” Troy begun.

“It was his own action,” Bÿsmann interrupted. “It had no political purpose nor was it involved with the Brotherhood.”

“I suspect he wanted to use Saint Lawrence to barter.” Argos crossed his arms, casting furtive glances at Vulpes.

“Expand.” Bÿsmann did not look impressed.

“He knows D’ssat wants to capture all the Pieces. If he had Saint Lawrence, especially now that he’s fallen out the Emperor’s grace, he could use him to persuade D’ssat to grant him exile or something similar in exchange for the Knight.”

Bÿsmann laughed wholeheartedly. “Gentlemen, let me assure you that what you have assumed is far from the truth. Mauld does not operate in that fashion.” He stood up. “Now if you will excuse me, there are matters I must look after.” He extended his arm to Vulpes and left with her.

“I see you have awakened,” Mauld murmured.

“I... w-what...” Skathen groaned. “Mauld?”

“Please, do not strain yourself.” Mauld offered him a glass of water. “Your wound is quite serious. I was able to abate it enough so that t’would not kill you, but you are still in danger.”

“Where am I?”

“Aboard Griefe. The ship has also been looking after you. The Princess and your Advisor are taking care of business and assuring that the construction of the underground base continues as scheduled.”

“The ship is looking after me?” Skathen asked flatly.

“So I suppose you do not know about it either...” Mauld paused. “Well, you father found this metal. T’is sentient. I do not understand it, only I know that each time t’is moulded into a form, it chooses a living organism to bond with. Griefe had ne’er selected anyone and now has elected you. The ship is a little whacky, but I am certain you two will get along just fine.”

“Whacky?”

Mauld shrugged. “Well, t’is gone completely mad. It witnessed too much suffering and all the empathic pulses t’was able to absorb were negative to say the least, considering it remain’d in this harbour for so long cultivating only the emotions of the Drule and Doomites. Griefe, howe’er, will do everything in its power to protect you. T’will suicide if you die.”

“Mauld.” Skathen cocked his head. “Why are you confusing me?”

“Well, at least you are not accusing me of lying to you.” Mauld grinned.

“Griefe spoke to me. I thought it was...” Skathen looked away.

“The ghost of your father?”

“Well, he did come back for mother.”

Mauld looked amused. “So t’was D’ssat who helped the Queen escape from the Main. The cameras caught the action, but I did not believe it... I eer did wonder what had happened.”

Skathen’s head snapped up. “Can I...? Can I see those disks?”

“I am afraid I am powerless to retrieve them, youngling. I will not be welcomed into the Empire.”

“Why did you go to Arus to capture my mother? What were you going to do to her?”

“Naught. I took her because I knew the Knights would be deployed to entomb her. She would be, ironically enough, safer in the Dark Ring. T’was also to ruffle the feathers of the Alliance.” Mauld smirked. “Well, it worked. They did come here seeking battle.”

“How did you capture Tiella and Marzad? Why?”

“I went after Saint Lawrence. I was going to use him as a tool to either demolish the Alliance or gain entry into them. Marzad and the Princess were at the wrong place at the wrong time as the saying goes.”

“Are you going to let them go?”

“They are already here, are they not?”

“But I’m certain you’ve imposed certain rules.”

“No. They are free to do as they wish. They granted me a dry dock to repair Fury and I am repaying them by conceding them freedom and helping you recover. I have also decided that the Alliance holds no interest for me.” Mauld’s lips curved into a smile. “At least for now.”

“Then what are your plans?”

Mauld took the empty glass from Skathen. “I am going to break Province Eighteen from the Empire and convert it to its former glory. Planet Doom will be resurrected.”

“Oh.” Skathen nodded as if Mauld had simply observed that it was rainy day. “Mauld, tell me something if you don’t mind...” He stared intently at the violet orbs. “Are you completely mad or just really creative?”

“I would say I am teetering on a thin line, ready to plunge into creative madness.”

“Okay. I was just really curious.” Skathen sighed. “What you propose is ludicrous, so you know,” he continued in the conversational tone they had been having.

“Not necessarily.” Mauld arched an eyebrow as he refilled the glass and handed it to Skathen again. “You see, you desired Doom to stand on neutral grounds. For as long as you remain in the Dark Ring, this will not happen. I toiled laboriously to conquer much for His Excellency but at the end I was replaced, unceremoniously, by Captain Gran’nam. I am not too pleased by that, I assure you. Therefore, I am planning to extract my revenge.”

“By helping me?”

“By taking away one of the Provinces... mayhap three of them if everything goes according to my plans; and as a bonus, the elimination of the Parliament of Rooks.”

Skathen sighed. “How do you propose we go about this?”

“So you want to help me?” Mauld looked cheekily at him.

“We’re after the same result. I reckon we are better off working together.”

“Very well. First off, we are going to outfit Doom with an engine. T’will become a fortress like Hansbach. This will give us the upper hand since we shall be able to travel.”

“An engine?” Skathen slumped into his pillow.

“Your Majesty, if you have any better ideas, please do not hesitate to share them. Remember that my plans ne’er fail.”

“You’re out of a job,” Skathen sneered. “You can’t be that good.”

“That is because I chose not to return to the Main. Had I gone back, I would still be the Admiral to His Excellency. I only resent the choice he made in replacement.” Mauld blinked in a calculative manner. “There are also Provinces Nineteen and Twenty. Both can be easily swayed to my side.”

Skathen’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I chose their rulers carefully. They are my men, not the Emperor’s.”

“Mauld, tell me this then, how long until you betray me?”

“Until you tell me that you no longer have a need for me. In which case I will move on and find other suitable living quarters. Currently, I am drifting and I am willing to help your cause.” *And I also vowed to look after you.*

"I see..." Skathen closed his eyes. "Please let me think about this."
"As you wish." Mauld got up. "I will be leaving Doom for a short soiree. Expect me back within a few days. I am leaving Fury and taking only Abaddon. Saint Lawrence is also going to remain here as your prisoner... After all, you wanted the Knights." He left.

"Allura, where are you going?" Keith asked quietly.
"To the audience Mauld has requested," she answered sharply.
Keith's jaw worked but no sound came out.
"If you are expecting me to ask your permission or to invite you along, you'll be sadly disappointed."

"But..."
"This is none of your business, Keith," Allura snapped. "I'm sick to death of you treating me like something that's intended to be kept in a display case under tight security. Now excuse me, I have an audience to attend." She spun away.

Keith locked his jaw, and with narrowed eyes swore revenge against the grievance Allura was inflicting upon him. He walked away and considered finding Lance, but shook his head. Since his return to Doom, his relationship with the other pilots had never been the same. They treated him with awe and reverence. Keith did not know if they feared a reoccurrence of the malady that had infected him, or if they were amazed at his recovery.

But did I recover? he pondered as he stopped at a window and looked outside. His black eyes reflected the sun rays upon the calm surface of the lake. *Some times I remember things I did that I don't know if I can forgive myself for.* He scowled lightly, his lips parting slightly. *Did I really commit those crimes? Is that why I'm hated by everyone? Is this my punishment? I always believed one would have to die first before facing Purgatory, but I see the falsehood in this ideal. Since I recovered from whatever it was Mauld did to me, I've been living in this travesty of existence. I sleep, I wake... I perform all the normal human functions, but... my mind... it's so scattered!* He took a deep breath and shook some of his white bangs back. *Oh, Skathen... I hope you're alright. I know you must be. And yet... would I feel sad if you perished? And why can't I bring myself to feel self-loath for the action I committed against you... my son? Is hatred so deeply imbedded within me that I'm impotent to feel anything else?*

"...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?"

Get out of my mind, Lotor! I don't want to hear you now! Keith clutched his head, shutting his eyes tightly. *Grant me peace for crying out loud!* He looked up, took a deep breath and composed himself. *Let me figure out my own strife... And why does this keep tormenting me? Why is this etched in my mind? I don't remember anything else you've said to me except for these stinging words.*

"Keith?"
Well... he found me. Keith smiled lightly before turning. "Lance... What news?"
Lance cocked his head curiously at him. "We're heading out for a pint, Skipper. Interested?"

A pint... Such mundane act... My life is such a mess I forget that I'm only a man. How long has it been since I last enjoyed the simple pleasures in life?

"Keith?" Lance called again, mistaking his silence.
"Yes." Keith nodded his head. "I would like that." *And maybe I'll forget about things... at least for a while. Yes... I need to forget.*

"My Queen." Mauld bowed low and kissed the ring on her finger. "I do hope this day finds you well."

Allura waited until Mauld stood straight again. "Quite. Now what's the purpose of this visit? Why could you not give me specifics earlier?"

"I could not risk the transmission being intercepted." Mauld leaned against a table. "Milady, great changes are about to occur and your son, young King D'ssat, will need your help more than e'er."

"What's happening, Mauld? How's Skathen?"

"He is recovering..."

"From what?" Allura interrupted, knitting her brows.

Mauld studied her briefly. "Then I do not suppose King Akira has informed you of the circumstances of his escape?"

"Mauld, what are you saying?"

"He attacked the youngling. He was found nearly dead by his Advisor."

Allura reached back until she found a chair and sat down heavily. "You..." She shook her head. "But Keith would have never..." She buried her face in her hands.

"Yet again, I seem to bring you naught but woe with my presence..." Mauld sighed. "We can postpone this meeting if t'is more convenient for you, Your Majesty."

"No..." Allura raised her head, took a deep breath and calmed herself. "What were you saying about Skathen? What does he need?"

"Doom is to regain autonomy. The King is yet unsure as to the means of reaching that goal; howe'er, I have promised that I would work closely with him to realise the target. I have suggested a few methods, but as I have stated ere, his health is frail currently and he is dedicating most of his time to rest. Regardless, whiche'er course he chooses, he will need help. If he agrees to my aid, I will, possibly, be able to supply him with Furie and Brethan. This, howe'er, shall not prove enough. He will need Arus, or rather, the Diamond Galaxy." Mauld shrugged. "What I am proposing is for the tables to be turned. Instead of suffering the attacks from the Dark Ring, you commence attacks upon it."

"That's insanity!"

"I have been informed of this particular detail several times already, Madam, but I do thank you for your reminder." Mauld smirked under her glare. "If the King refuses my help, he will still need your aid. He cannot against the Dark Ring alone and that is what he is planning to do."

"Why are you helping him?" Allura asked trying to establish some comprehension in the situation.

"Because I have been dismissed from the Empire. I am my own man now." Mauld looked out of the window. "And since I was the catalyst for Doom becoming Province Eighteen, t'would only be fair if I aid it in its freedom."

"What?!"

Mauld raised an eyebrow and looked at her again. "Who do you think sent the Brethan against Doom? I do admit to having naught to do with their attack on Arus, but the initial assault was my doing."

"How could you...?" Allura stopped unable to finish the sentence.

"It had to be done. King Zarkon had defected and had to be retrained. There had to be a viable excuse for him to have been extracted from the throne and Prince Lotor placed there instead."

"But... You decimated the planet!"

"E'en in chaos there is order. We could not simply carry out this mission. You see, if Emperor Zheppo had simply sent a Rook to assassinate King Zarkon, this action would have probably precipitated a civil war in the Dark Ring. All the Viceroys would have felt threatened by the idea that as soon as the Emperor felt they defected he would simply be eliminated. The Brethan took the blame for the plan and none was the wiser." He paused. "E'en when I did usurper the title of Emperor, I knew t'was a foolish notion. The Drule would have revolted against it and destroy'd me."

"Mauld, what do you want to do exactly?"

"I want the complete annihilation of the Empire." He grinned.

"Why?!" Allura demanded standing up.

Violet eyes glittered. "Milady, I cannot trust you with this intelligence."

"You... But..." She shook her head.

Mauld walked quietly towards her and stood a short distance away from her. "Queen Amselle, you will learn soon enough what my mission is. Though I am aloof, I do answer to one

person. He has commanded me to perform a task and I will do thus. Though my methods are slow and deceptive, you must understand that I am but one man against..." He smiled and touched her face delicately. "Well, against many people. I cannot hope to face everything alone. If I am killed my mission is a failure and I have ne'er failed nor do I concur with this concept."

Allura felt a strange comfort from the touch upon her skin. "So you propose the annihilation of the Empire... But you once said that you did not relish in death. Have your ideals changed?"

"I do not plan to annihilate the population of the Empire. I simply want the utter destruction of the Empire itself. D'ssat is a promising tool to achieve this and he will also benefit from my action. If the Diamond Galaxy were to be involved, t'would almost assure success."

"And the Alliance?"

"They will fall eventually."

"Then you plan..."

"I ne'er said that." Mauld moved closer to her. "Do not deduce anything from whate'er I do not reveal to you. T'is a dangerous thing to do."

"Tell me what..."

Mauld interrupted her by gently touching his lips to hers. "There is no more need for words, Your Majesty. You will decide whether or not you want to partake of this mission. Naught will, of course, befall the Diamond Galaxy. T'is now a war betwixt the three outer planets and the core of the Dark Ring." He brushed his lips against hers briefly before kissing her deeply.

Involuntarily, Allura's hands travelled the length of his arms, feeling the taut muscles, before wrapping her arms around his neck; avoiding the sharp, dragon-shaped ailettes. Mauld kissed her for a few moments longer before bringing his hands up and holding her by the waist. He caressed her softly and pulled her closer to himself feeling her contour against his body.

"Hum... So are we to finally consummate our marriage?" He smiled. "I mean, we divorced without ever getting a chance to, well, get to know each other."

She pushed him away hesitantly. "I can't... I..."

Mauld returned to his place by the desk. "Of course."

"How can you be so cruel and yet so gentle?" Allura asked frustrated.

"Milady, I understand honour if that is what you mean. I would ne'er have you do something that you will come to regret later. I know that you resent your husband at the moment, but you are carrying his fruit."

"How do you know this?!" Allura retorted.

"I am periodically scanning my immediate surroundings. T'is a survival weapon. Eer know what or who is around you. And I am constantly detecting two life forms besides my own. One is you, the other within you."

Allura sighed. "Then, if you must know, it's not Keith's."

Mauld blinked puzzled.

"Mauld, Lotor came back..."

Mauld interrupted her with laughter. "Your Highness, you do not mean to tell me that his return was so – er – prolific! That is great news indeed!"

"What do you mean?"

"More threads for me to spin into a web..." He walked to her again. "Do not look at me thus, beautiful one, I will ne'er allow any harm to ever befall you."

"Then why did you take me to the Main?" Allura demanded stomping her foot down.

"To protect you against the Knights. But this story is getting repetitive. You were to be kept there for a few days and then you were going to escape because we would prove too incompetent to hold you. When I learned of your pre-mature break out I, ne'ertheless, conveniently had a Nephillim outfitted for a voyage. If you remember, there was only one guard. Hum..." He chuckled. "A little too opportune, think you not?"

Allura shook her head, but a smile did find a place on her lips. "Mauld... You..."

"I would ne'er hurt anyone out of malice, My Queen. I do not claim to be a pacifist or a purist; howe'er, I will create intrigues simply to distract everyone from fruitless battles that will claim lives."

Allura ran her hands the length of his arms again. Her fingers traced the sharp edges of the ailettes carefully, before she brought her hands to his neck and finally rested them on his

chest. “There’s one thing I’ve always wanted to tell you...” Her eyes grew dark. “When we were in Hansbach... I’m sorry for you loss.”

Mauld looked down, his eyes shifting rapidly. “Aye... I did not lose all... Anoth’r suffer’d far more than me.” He sighed. “I lost Dorma, whom I did not realised I loved until t’was too late. Our fruit was taken by another and raised away from me... I just recently have come to meet him.”

Allura stared at him in blissful confusion.

“The short of it is: Dorma was pregnant, Princess D’ssat was kind enough to carry the unborn child. Howe’er, she disappeared when we returned to the Main. I have only recently been reunited with my son.”

“You must have been very happy,” Allura commented bewildered.

“I am not sure how to feel, to be honest. He had ne’er expected that he would come to meet his father and he certainly did not expect him to be the Admiral of the Drule Emperor. I am not sure if he was disappointed to tears or if he want’d to kill me.”

“Who is your son?”

“The Princess of Arus’ lover,” Mauld stated.

Allura’s knees turned liquid but Mauld caught her before she could fall. Mauld carried her to the couch and placed her down gently, kneeling before her.

“Anon, I shall grace you a heart attack, Milady.” He chortled.

“Marzad... he’s your son...” Allura shook her head. “Is everyone in the universe related to this single group of people?” she wondered aloud.

“It feels that way...”

Allura caressed his smooth face gently. “Mauld, make me forget, would you...?”

He looked equivocally at her. “Know you what you ask?”

“I didn’t mean it with Psionics, Mauld...” She leaned closer to him, tracing the outline of his lips with her fingers as he stole furtive kisses. “Just take me in your arms and make me forget about everything... at least for a while.”

Tentatively, Mauld leaned towards her. Their lips met again in a deep kiss, their hands growing bolder and exploring more of each other’s body until passion overtook them. Mauld’s hesitance evaporated and he forgot about the world without the room.

If they find out about me sneaking out of Griefe, they are gonna strap me down to that bed with gyves, Skathen huffed. But I’m so totally bored! And the reports they are bringing me are hardly satisfactory. I want to see what’s going on. If what Marzad is saying is true then production is at twenty percent and that will hardly do. Oh well, I’ll just have to put my foot down and tell them...

“EEK!”

Skathen jumped back, hit the wall and slithered down to the floor. A tall, slim, platinum haired woman regarded him coolly. She had landed in front of him from the rafters in the ceiling silently.

“You would do well to tell me where I can find Mauld,” her husky voice cut the air.

Skathen’s heart slowed down from the surprise only to start up again when he took in the sight of the woman. *Maybe I died... That’s gotta be it. Dear gods! She’s... ooh!! Beatrice... oh yeah! She’s here to take my hand and lead me to Heaven... I wonder if it’s alright to do that kind of stuff in Heaven.*

“Why do want Mauld?” he asked instead.

She blinked languidly. “That’s none of your business.”

“Who are you?” Skathen demanded. “For some reason you look familiar...” *So much for being an angel...*

The vixen looked at him through pained eyes as realisation finally dawned on her. “My name’s Vulpes... I’m... I was...” She shook her head, all the harshness leaving her mirror-like eyes replaced by grief. “I’m your aunt, your father’s sister.”

Heck! Dang! Why do all the hot chicks have to be related to me! Argh! Definitely not Beatrice material here. Skathen shook his head. *Whoa! Did she just say...?*

“You’re my aunt? My father’s sister...” Skathen repeated numbly.

She nodded.

"You know, I was considering getting up, but I think I'll just sit here... Oh dear, I do feel faint," Skathen moaned.

"Do not..." Vulpes commanded. "You are..." She knelt before him. "You're the last of my family. Everyone else is gone."

Skathen shook his head. "No. Queen Allura is expecting a child from my father. Keith is our cousin. There are more family members, trust me." He reached out to touch her hand.

Vulpes flinched away from him, her eyes growing dark and harsh. "Do not, if you wish to continue drawing breath."

Skathen lifted his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to offend you. It's just that... It's just that I never expected to meet anyone from, well, this side of the family. No one ever told me I had an aunt."

"You are just as weak as all others." She sounded disgusted.

"What do you mean?" he demanded defensively.

"You give yourself so easily to emotions," she snapped.

"Oh like you're one to talk!" Skathen got up and stomped his foot down. "Ow!" He took a deep breath willing the pain away. "Listen here, missy, don't give me this load of being emotional and all that stuff. I've been dragged through mud in the past few months and I'm in no mood to put up with a temperamental aunt who dropped in from the ceiling. Look, I'm the one who pulls those kinds of stunts and I'm the one who pitches tantrums. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get somewhere so that I can yell at more people," he reproached her harshly and stormed off.

Vulpes stared at him disbelief. Since Mauld had taken her to the Abbey, she had been treated gently and caringly by everyone who knew her. That her own nephew had scolded her, the second most dangerous and unstable assassin of the Bishops, impressed her.

"Where's Mauld?" she called after him.

"I don't know! You can search me but I honestly don't think you're gonna find him in my pocket or whatever."

"Why are you so moody?"

Skathen stopped and turned to face her. "Because you suddenly appear in my life after all these years and you call me a weakling simply because I wanted to hold your hand. If father was around I'll bet he would give you an earful."

"You're doing a fine job," Vulpes commented bewildered.

"Well, I try..." Skathen paused. "So, how come you want Mauld? Is he your boyfriend?"

Vulpes shuddered. "No."

"Then?" He crossed his arms and arched an eyebrow.

"He has something I need."

"And that would be?" came Mauld's voice in the hallway. "And, youngling, Griefe is quite upset at you tricking her. I recommend you return to your bed immediately and apologise..." He grinned. "Oh, and do not say anything to further irritate her, she has got all the pods open, turrets charged and she is ready to fire."

Skathen threw his hands up in the air. "I don't believe this! I'm being held hostage by a psychotic ship, a psychotic Psion and a psychotic aunt... Well, sucks to that! I'm going to my study and I'm going to get my planet back in motion. You go and tell Griefe to take a pill and chill out. I'll go back when I'm ready!" He walked away.

Mauld watched him before turning to Vulpes. "Aye, he definitely takes after your side of the family." He chuckled at Vulpes scowl. "But you were saying about something I have that you want."

"Saint Lawrence. I am to retrieve him from you."

"No go."

"You're not leaving me many options."

"A taste of your own bitter medicine, Madam." Mauld looked amused. "Do you think I enjoyed when you simply took off. Not only you abandoned me but you took my son along. You did not even have the decency of returning him to me after he was born. Instead he drifted around until he was sucked by this vortex that young D'ssat seems to be and our paths crossed. Milady, I resent that. I resent much about you. Mainly, I resent the fact that you have ever scorned my love

for you. Have a good day, and tell the Abbot that Saint Lawrence will be released anon. I still have use for him.” He walked away.

“What are you doing here?” Marzad demanded. “You’re supposed to be in bed!” he rebuked.

“Stuff it. I’m sick of being scolded. I want to know how production is going. I want to know the status of everything.” Skathen put his hands on his hips and then grabbed on to the desk as the castle shook. “Mainly, I want to know who’s firing at us!”

As the alarms blared, Mauld entered Skathen’s study followed by Vulpes. Tiella looked up from the controls.

“Nephillims. There’s a whole armada swooping down flanked by heavy ships.” Tiella regarded the panels again. “And I think they plan to do us no end of violence.”

“Why didn’t the alarms sound sooner?” Skathen barked. “It’s not like we are sitting here fanning our...” Another blast interrupted his expletive.

“Because the circuitry of the castle is not optimal,” Marzad replied as he got up from the floor. “We are in the process of building an underground facility! Skathen, there’s a lot going on that you’re not aware of...”

“That’s because you failed to tell me! I’ve been lying on that bed bored to tears and you couldn’t even bring me reading material!” Skathen screamed and pounced on Marzad.

Marzad and Skathen went rolling for a short distance before a shock wave reached them and they fell away from each other. Mauld shook his head as if he was dealing with two boys with delinquent tendencies.

“That is quite enough from you two. The Nephillims are here to destroy us. Cease with the bickering.” Mauld turned to Tiella. “Set all Cobra Cannons to automatic firing. The castle is under siege. Marzad, ready all Skullships to go at once. Lead them in Rue and cause as much mayhem as you can.” He turned to Vulpes. “Take Abaddon, I know you are familiar with the Nephillim. I will board Fury and take on their heavy ships.”

“Excuse me.” Skathen raised a hand.

“You go back to Griefe and rest!” Mauld snapped. “Neither one of you is in any condition to fight... And, Your Majesty, that is an order!”

“Hey! I’m the...”

“You are a spoiled brat, Skathen.” Mauld put his hands on his hips, unconsciously taking a paternal persona. “You may have the Crown, but you are still a suckling. All you understand of war is theory from text books. Now to bed!” he commanded, looking at Skathen as if daring the young King to defy him.

Skathen locked his jaw.

“Fret not, I wish not for your Crown. I just do not want you to lose it.” He turned and left.

“What a... PRUNE!” Skathen huffed.

“He’s right,” Tiella replied simply. “Now go to bed.” She watched him briefly. “And, Skay, I’ve locked down all the gates. Griefe will not be able to leave.”

“Et tu, Brutus?” Skathen hung his head miserably and left.

“Why, greetings, Admiral Gran’nam,” Mauld saluted sarcastically. “And what, pray tell, do we owe the honour of having your malodorous carcass presented ere us?” He cocked his head, his face a mask of childish jollity.

“So you did join the ranks of the upstart.” Gran’nam nearly frothed in the mouth.

“Not yet. I am working on that.” Mauld blinked slowly. “You do know that you are missing the strongest Horde Leader, do you not?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Gran’nam demanded.

As if in cue, Vulpes left Fury with Abaddon and positioned herself between the battleship and Ksiel. A band of Nephillims broke rank from the Drule side and moved to flank Abaddon.

“What...?!” Gran’nam began.

“As I stated, Abaddon was not with you. Its Horde will follow it to the end...” Mauld smiled sardonically. “Admiral, I hand picked the men piloting Abaddon’s Horde. They are mine.” Unable

to contain himself any longer, he laughed. “And now they are going to destroy you. Like Abaddon, they are stronger than the other Horde members... Ta ta.” He waved and closed the transmission.

Skathen kicked the floor and continued pacing the berth. “Not fair! Not fair at all I tell you! Why am I kept here when everyone is out there having fun?”

Because we are hurt, Griefe replied.

“Still! I don’t wanna be stuck in this stupid wharf. I’m not even sick anymore.”

Your body tells me otherwise.

“Can you really sense that, Griefe?” Skathen placed his hands on the wall. “Are you really alive? Am I your chosen?” He put his face to his metal, which, surprisingly, felt warm to the touch. “Griefe, why did you wait? Why...?” He closed his eyes.

My creator had been chosen by my sister Mourn. I did not have another to choose to form a bond. I did not wish for anyone who inhabited this place before your arrival. Griefe sent an empathic pulse to Skathen. *Do you not wish for me?*

Skathen detected fear and sadness in the question. “Beloved...” He scowled. *Beloved?* he asked himself. Another pulse of sadness passed through him and he realised that he would rather die than distress the ship. *I will not hurt you. I could not hurt you...* “Griefe, we are one. You’re mine as I’m yours.”

Another pulse, this one normal, if a little elated. Griefe had sensed him more than heard, since it could capture his thoughts and emotions and not hear his spoken words. Skathen startled as the ship suddenly shuddered and he heard a familiar hum.

“Griefe!”

We go to the battlefield. This is no place for me. I was created for combat and I will not be denied it. I suggest you go to the bridge.

“Tiella has locked us in.”

Gun Engines charging, Griefe replied simply.

“Uh oh...” Skathen ran to the bridge. “Tiella! Let us out! If you don’t Griefe is going to blow her way out!”

“Skathen!” Tiella looked angrily at him. “What do you think...?”

“Listen to me! I’m not thinking anything! I was minding my own business and sulking when Griefe decided that it would be absolutely cool to go out and join the battle. Now open the bloody gates! If you don’t, we’re blowing through.”

“Skathen...”

“I *am* the King of Doom, or has everyone forgotten this?!” he snarled. “Open the gates now!”

Tiella hurled a volley of curses at him but did as was demanded.

“To me Horde,” Vulpes commanded.

The Drule paused momentarily, unused to having a woman leading them. However, they understood the tone to be authoritative and they responded unquestioning. Abaddon shot up, the Horde following in a graceful arch. Abaddon stopped when it had gained a higher position than the ships and its grand, red wings spread open. The Horde also paused, falling into an arrow head formation, keeping Abaddon as the tip.

“You’re meat,” Gran’nam stated simply.

Red wings twitched as if in irritation. Abaddon’s purple eyes shifted to focus on Ksiel.

“I warned you once, little girl,” Gran’nam snarled. “You pay proper respect where it’s due. You failed the first time and you’re failing again. You’re dead.”

Abaddon’s wings folded forward, enveloping the Nephillim. As one, the Horde rushed forward and began to attack Ksiel’s Horde. Although they had not been told, they knew Ksiel would fall under Abaddon’s attack. It was not their place to take their Leader’s quarry.

Vulpes studied Ksiel briefly. Opening Abaddon’s wings again, she swooped down, yellow sword out and positioned like a harpoon. Gran’nam reacted too late and the sword imbedded

firmly in Ksiel's hip area. The two Nephillims went into a tumble, crashing into Helel and Shaftiel, which had just detached their own Hordes against Abaddon's.

"Sire, all turrets charged and ready to fire," an officer aboard Fury announced.

"Fire at will." Mauld leaned back on his chair. "And do make sure you do not fire into the Nephillims' midst. Abaddon and the Horde are in there. I do not want to lose them."

"Aye, sire."

Mauld was about to issue the next command when the alarms in Fury began to blare. He looked up at the main screen and saw as a great and battered silver ship began to approach the war zone. Mauld threw his hands up in the air in defeat.

"Why am not surprised?" He rolled his eyes. "Establish a link to Griefe," he ordered.

"Admiral?" Skathen asked sweetly. "And how, pray tell, may I help you?"

Mauld's eyes sparkled in raw amusement. "Your Majesty, you are taking a great chance by being out here as wounded as you and Griefe are. I would recommend you return to Doom."

"I thank you for your concern, Admiral, but I'll remain in this battle. Both Griefe and I feel that it's our battle and it's our duty to secure Doom's safety."

"Stubborn..." Mauld shook his head. "But then, t'would hardly do if you were not. Very well, King D'ssat, the battlefield is yours."

"Good. Start by backing out of there, Mauld. The Tri-Aft Turrets are charging. Griefe is going to disgorge LaserChem all over those ships..." Skathen arched an eyebrow. "Unless, of course, they surrender."

"You people talk too much!" Tiella finally snapped. "All missile silos are open. All underground turrets charged and all airlocks open. Units ready to fire," she announced.

"Bloodthirsty," Mauld commented amused as Fury's retro rockets came alive attempting to bring the ship out of Griefe's calamitous path.

"Tiella, set all guns to fire in automatic in T-minus eight minutes," Skathen said, doing some quick calculations. "If Griefe is still in the way, disregard us and fire at will."

"Skay!"

"Just do it." *Can you handle it, my love?*

Child's play, the craft would have chuckled if it had known how.

"Tri-Aft Turrets at fifty percent," Skathen called. "Mauld, I would recommend you really get the heck out of there."

"Fury is not at its optimal, Your Highness. I can only output as much power as the ship is willing to give."

"Pull to port and get out of range," Skathen commanded. "Those Gun and Torpedo Boats are going down." He narrowed his eyes.

Mauld nodded and pulled Fury hard. Through the windows in the first bridge he saw Abaddon fall under the combined forces of Ksiel, Helel, Shaftiel, Dummah and Makkiel. Mauld locked his jaw and considered firing but knew that even a guided missile could miss its target.

Vulpes...

His eyes widened in shock as he saw Abaddon hold out its sword with two hands and commence to gyrate. The other Horde Leaders pushed away but not before the laser-cased sword did them substantial damage. Abaddon continued in its spin, looking like a gigantic screw piercing the aether in its upward path.

"Unbelievable." Mauld clicked his tongue in amazement. "She is a natural! So much like her brother."

Before his wonderment could progress further, Mauld was rudely startled by Griefe. He jumped up involuntarily as he watched the Tri-Aft Turrets spew their toxic concoction of laser and radioactive chemicals with deadly accuracy, with a ruinous result. All of the Drule heavy ships which were enveloped by the terminal concoction remained still, as if caught in suspended animation, before they seemed to fall apart atom by atom.

Once the malign shroud fell away, nothing remained of the crafts to give any indication that they had ever been there.

"I will be damned..." Mauld sat down again. "Mayhap the D'ssat family should add 'Cataclysmic' as a tag to their name..." He shook his head in incredulity.

The silver leviathan of space began to reverse out of the fray just as the missiles left the silos on Doom. They hit the midst of the remaining ships, causing a few to lose control and hit their sister ships, creating further mayhem in the Drule fleet.

“Fire!” Mauld barked.

Fury’s turrets trained on the Horde and began to annihilate the Nephillim. Griefe’s pod-like projections opened and the turrets within swivelled adding their own battery of fire. Torpedoes shot from the stern, adding more bedlam to the conflagration in the Drule flanks.

Abaddon swooped down at the gathered Horde Leaders, intending to completely destroy them. They scattered, but the yellow sword bit deep into Makkie. The two went into a tumble before crashing onto Doom. Mauld called desperately for her, but received only static for answer.

“Not nice,” Marzad scolded as he flew in with Rue and began to discharge all of the jet’s firepower onto the Leaders.

“Enough!” Gran’nam suddenly screamed. *We were supposed to find a weak planet. Instead we find two dreadnaughts and Abaddon’s Horde mutiny. Hum... His Excellency will not be pleased by these reports. Worse still I can’t even bring the dogs back in chains to be given the cat.*

Mauld laughed wholeheartedly as he watched the Drule retreat.

“Admiral,” Skathen called exiting Griefe.

Mauld arched an eyebrow and turned to face him. “Admiral?”

“Yeah. Admiral.” Skathen reciprocated the look. “Listen up, if you’re planning to make yourself a permanent resident of this joint, then you’ll be my Admiral.”

“And Marzad?”

“He’s... er... Advisor? I’ll split up your job, how about that?” Skathen waved a dismissing hand. “No matter...”

“You could have left me behind, you know,” Fenn huffed as he exited Fury. “You could have killed me.”

Mauld smirked. “Howe’er did you escape from your berth?”

“It’s a secret,” Fenn grinned.

“Your Majesty, I present you with Knight Saint Lawrence. Now, if you will pardon me, I want to get to the fuselage of the Nephillim. Her Majesty may still be alive.”

Skathen locked his jaw and nodded solemnly, hoping, against hope, that Mauld was right. From the air the smoking Nephillims looked to be no more than twisted, overheated metal.

“So...” Fenn began, interrupting Skathen’s ominous thoughts. “Do I have to kill you to get out of here or are you just going to let me go?”

“You’re not going anywhere, Fenn,” Skathen affirmed.

“You really think so?” Fenn looked cheekily at him. “I know different.”

“You were told a lie then.”

“Do you really think you can keep me for very long? I’m Fenn the Abominable!”

“Don’t you mean Admirable, Impeccable or some like term?”

Fenn blinked at him considering his words briefly. “Heck!” He stomped his foot down. “I always get that wrong.”

“No matter, Unca Fenn,” Skathen continued sarcastically. “Don’t forget who drilled you with a powder bombs...”

Fenn sighed and looked flatly at him. “And you couldn’t have picked a better moment! I was boasting about how impossible I’m to catch when ‘bam!’ you got me right on the face. Not only that but you ‘poof!’ disappeared!”

Skathen looked smugly at him. “When you’re hot, you’re hot.”

“I like you kid, you have lots of potential...” Fenn knitted his brow in thought. “Say, you’re the Great Kahoona of the Queen’s Nite Club, aren’t you?”

“You could say that.”

“Cool. I was going to be sent to kill you. I suppose it was a good thing Mauld caught me. I never got the assignment.” Fenn cocked his head. “Though I’m supposed to kill him.”

“Well, all these jobs you have in queue will soon be at an end. The Queen is going to move against the Knights’ Club and you’ll be out of a job.”

“That sucks. I don’t know how to do anything else...” Fenn snapped his fingers. “Say, are you hiring? Can I put in a resume or something?” He suddenly made a grab for a nearby guard’s sword.

The movement was so unexpected and fast that no one was able to hinder him as he grasped the blade, flipped backwards in the air, above Skathen. Before he landed, the sword flew from the twirling body in the air, and imbedded itself into the wall just inches above another guard’s head, with a few hairs impaled into the hole.

Fenn landed in a crouch, winking at Skathen. “How’s that for a resume?”

“You missed,” Skathen pointed out, much to the chagrin of the guard who now had an unwanted hairdo.

“Ah, but I assure you that the flea will tell you I was on target, if fleas could speak and it wasn’t permanently pasted into the wall.” Fenn smiled then cast a suspicious look. “How sure are you of destroying the Knight’s Club?”

“There are no possibilities of failure if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Great! So, can I join your club?”

“But... Won’t you be betraying...”

“They won’t be around for long,” Fenn interrupted. “Listen, I have a family to feed. I can’t stay out of a job.”

“You? Family?” Skathen asked sceptically.

“Illegitimately speaking... But still! They have to eat! They are wee tykes, cute as buttons! They must take after me.” Fenn fell thoughtful, rubbing a hand against his chin.

“I’ll let Tiella decide if you’re to be accepted or not. For now, however, would you mind terribly getting into a cell?”

“Not at all.” Fenn skipped happily to one of the cells, closed the door and tossed the key out through the bars.

“Lunatic... That man is a certified lunatic.” Skathen threw his hands in the air.

“Your Majesty,” Mauld’s voice suddenly came on the transmission channels. “Prepare a med bay. Lady D’ssat is alive as is Captain Dirga, the pilot of Makkiel. They are both severely injured but will survive. I am bringing them in.”

Skathen hit the alarms and prayed silently that his aunt would indeed subsist and not be claimed by death. *I’ve only just met you... Are you to be taken away from me so soon? Even if you don’t really talk and you act like a typical mean aunt and stuff I really don’t want to see you go.*

“Keith?”

“Marshal,” Keith began. “I’m just calling to let you know that Arus may betray us soon.”

Graham nodded. “I expected this perfidy sooner or later...” He sighed. “What news?”

“The Queen has been meeting with Mauld.” Keith locked his jaw in anger, before composing himself. “I don’t know what they have been discussing; however, Mauld has his ways as we are well aware.”

Graham looked grave. “So you think he’s been influencing her to do things she wouldn’t otherwise do?”

“Yes. Also, she has taken Skathen side in this war and has grown quite cold towards me. I think this animosity has something to do with Mauld’s tempering,” Keith said, forcing himself to believe the lie he had just uttered. *I still love you, Allura! Why can’t you see that?! I’ll do anything to get you away from that scum.*

“Garrison will be on standby, Keith. As soon as they do anything that could be classified as treasonous, we’ll commence the attacks.” *Finally, the Diamond Galaxy will fall under our dominion.* Graham smiled subtly.

Keith scowled. “Sir, wouldn’t be prudent to wait for them to commence the attacks?”

“And if they don’t?”

“I’m sure Mauld will ‘convince’ Allura that that’s the best course of action. I mean, he’s greedy and I’m certain the Drule will keep pushing forward.”

“Keith, our mistake in the past was to allow the Diamond Galaxy to remain free. It’s not going to happen again. If they collaborate themselves with the Drule, then they’re the enemy. This time, they’ll be expatriated from the Alliance.”

But what if they don’t want to fight? I believe in Skathen. He wants peace and nothing more! Keith shook his head. *Or do I really believe in him? He kept me locked up... He’s dead for all I know...* He swallowed back his confusion.

“Akira?”

“Sir!”

Graham studied Keith briefly, not certain if he liked the cloud that had covered his eyes. “Be on your guard. Return to Garrison if anything happens.” He closed the transmission.

“Aye, sir!” Keith splayed his hands on the dormant before him and hung his head. *What’s happening to me? When did this lunacy resurface? I feel as I did when I lived on Doom and this time... this time there was no Mauld. Is this how I truly am? Is this the spoiled brat I’ve always been accused of being? I don’t get the toy so no one can have it?* Something churned in the still sludge his mind had become, sending ripples from its epicentre. *No! This is still Mauld’s doing. I can’t believe this is me.* Again, another undulation formed and Keith’s knees sagged slightly. *No... I can’t go on like this anymore; fabricating lies to cover lies... I go on and on in this endless circle...* He sighed. *Mauld did tell me the truth then. When he tampered with my mind, he did nothing more than bring my vilest emotions to the surface. He never created them...* A tear drop landed on his hand. *Does this make me stronger... better? If I accept who I am, will I be able to fight this corruption that has taken hold of me?*

“You know, you really must take after you mother,” Fenn said as Tiella freed him.

Tiella arched an eyebrow. “I don’t know if I understand what you mean.”

“Your magnificent beauty, of course!” Fenn bowed with a flourish. “Such tender...”

“Oh, you’re going to make me sick, stop.”

Fenn scowled straightening up. “Why do chicks always say that?”

“Probably because it’s the truth,” Tiella replied casually, leading him down the hallways.

“I’ll be damned.” Fenn followed in wonderment. “I never thought of that.”

“It doesn’t surprise me.”

“Are you calling me dumb?”

“No... I was just implying.”

“Oh, well, that’s a whole different matter. Implications are just implications and accusations are dirty things because you usually accuse people of things and it may not be true, while implications imply that the person may not be right but be judging something from lack of knowledge. Therefore that implies ignorance and not at all an insult!” Fenn looked pleased with his reasoning.

Tiella stopped and leaned against the wall, her mind whirling from the nonsensical information given her at a tremendous pace.

“Did I hurt you?”

“Oog...” Tiella shook her head and continued walking.

They reached an indoor arena. Tiella removed her cloak and stood at the centre looking at Fenn who stared at the gilded columns appraisingly, considering how long it would take him to chip away enough gold to live a rich, long life.

“As soon as my cousin arrives we’ll begin.”

“You have a cousin? Wow! She must be hot.”

“You made that mistake once, Knight.” Fenn froze as he felt eight cold and sharp blades pressed against the back of his neck. The voice was husky and strong. “Don’t make it again. You survived through intervention, and I assure you, this time, you will not be fated to have such luck.*”

“Ahm... heh... Really, there’s no need...” Fenn began.

He interrupted himself by ducking, spinning and drawing out his Knight’s blade with a fluid movement, almost too fast for the eyes to follow. However, the cobalt orbs which trailed his movements were arcane and thus registered each motion effortlessly.

“Now, vile creature, I shall...” Fenn’s jaw went slack as he took the sight in front of him. “...fall madly in love with you...”

Tiella raised an eyebrow in disbelief. Vulpes blinked laconically, almost resentful that anyone had ever questioned her sanity. Before her was an ideal specimen of a lunatic, ready to be committed into any respectful hospice or taken away for studies at a distinguished asylum.

“Lovely lady, oh! The sight of thee... The...” Fenn wiped drool away. “Oh, be still my fluttering heart!” He knelt down before Vulpes, who backed off a pace. “To you I would steal the stars and string them into a necklace for thy lovely neck...”

“That would probably be a little too heavy,” Tiella quipped.

“For thee, I would...” Fenn hiccupped suddenly, noting Tiella’s words. He turned his neck to face her. “You know, that wasn’t very civilised.”

“Fenn, we’re here to train! I didn’t bring you here to woo Vulpes.”

“But look at her! I’m sure if you weren’t lacking the necessary parts you would be trying to... er...” He grinned at Vulpes. “Learn all about bumble bees, and flowers and all the jolly things in life. Wouldn’t you love to have me teach you some things?”

“You bore me.” Vulpes crossed her arms.

Fenn got up. “Hey! Don’t go offending me, lady.”

“I am Princess Vulpes D’ssat. Address me properly.”

“Oh...” Fenn cocked his head. “As in Skathen’s sister?” He looked confused.

“As in Prince Lotor’s sister.”

“But you’re her cousin...” Fenn pointed to Tiella, grew more perplexed and threw his hands up in the air. “Oh, I don’t wanna know! I have a feeling you people will knot my brain into French braids and I’ll be stuck with that!” He fell thoughtful. “Not that it would be a bad thing. I mean, my brain would certainly be the most interesting looking brain within a hundred astronomical unit radius.”

“You can safely assume that your brain is already an interesting organ in the whole universe without the braid, Fenn,” Tiella responded.

“Oh! You’re just so full of it, aren’t you?!” Fenn huffed.

“Enough, Fenn,” Tiella almost pleaded. “Let’s get to the training at hand, or I’ll inform the King that you’re not fit to be one of the Queen’s Nite Club Pawns.”

“Alright, alright.” Fenn threw his hands up in the air defensively. “Let’s boogie!”

Allura entered the main room and looked around. When her eyes landed on Keith, her body shuddered in anger and repulse. She looked at Lance and Hunk and gave them a meaningful look. Without hesitation, they stood and left.

“You attacked Skathen,” she stated, crossing her arms. “Why did you lie to me?”

“I never lied to you!” Keith got up, quite tired of contending with Allura’s demeanour.

“You said it was brawl...” she snarled. “Skathen almost died from a sword wound, inflicted by you!”

“I...”

“You were never good at lying, Keith. You shouldn’t start now. If you were playing Mauld’s game of omitting the truth, you did a poor job.” Allura threw her arms down. “You attacked Skathen! You stabbed him! You’re despicable! I don’t believe you would have attacked him like this! A boy you called son!”

“Allura! I had to get out of that cell! I’m sick of being held hostage on that bloody planet. Every time I turn around, I find myself locked up somewhere on Doom. First Zarkon, then it was Lotor, I graduated with Mauld and became a Viceroy, but I was still a prisoner. Finally there’s Skathen, my cousin, my son! And the little ingrate locks me up!” Keith snapped. “I never meant to hurt him. I took the sword and he moved, as usual, too fast and I hit him. He was not...”

“His health, according to Mauld, is quite frail at the moment. He was found almost dead! I think you lost your mind after your last sojourn on Doom. You’ve gone completely mad.” Allura threw a glass at him.

Keith saw the glass coming towards him but made no move to dodge it. The glass hit him on the chest and he grunted involuntarily. He narrowed his eyes at Allura and moved fluidly

towards her. To his surprise, Allura moved swiftly out of the way and drew a gun from the folds of her dress.

“Don’t try,” Allura retorted acidly. “If you attempt to do anything against me, God help me, I’ll blow your head open, Keith.”

Keith scowled, startled at the harsh tone and choice of words. The woman before him was Allura; however, she radiated a danger foreign to her natural disposition. Her chin was raised imperially and he knew, somehow, that she would not hesitate to make her threat come to pass.

“Get out of Arus, Keith,” Allura commanded coolly. “In fact, I want you to vacate the Diamond Galaxy. If you fail to obey my order, I’ll warrant your incarceration and your sentence will be death.”

Keith felt his emotions churning foully within his mind. Something, deep beneath his true self struggled to rear its head. Like a sprouting seed, it began to push its way out through the very fabric of his being. A seed planted many years ago and severed cruelly after it had germinated. Unlike any other time since the event, he did not resist the cryptomnesia. He allowed it to come forth and felt all purity and love vanish from him. The stump would grow once again and it would bloom victoriously.

“I will go, Allura.” Keith’s voice was hollow and he smiled predatorily. “But don’t forget me too soon. We’ll meet again. And woe to you.” He turned and left.

Allura remained still staring at the door until she finally slumped against a table, massaging her temples. A sound caught her attention and she brought the gun up, but sighed in relief upon seeing Lance.

“Princess?” Lance called cautiously.

“Everything is okay,” she tried to keep a tremor out of her voice.

“Keith...”

“Is no longer part of us,” she finished the sentence. “He’s gone and he’s never to return.” Allura took a deep breath. “Come, Lance, we have to start a council of war.”

“War?” Lance sounded surprised.

“We’ll destroy the Drule Empire once and for all.”

Lance’s eyes went round in shock.

“Don’t worry.” Allura smiled. “We’ll have plenty of help.”

Lance sighed and followed, wondering what had prompted the latest marital spat between Keith and Allura. Whatever it was, he was certain he did not want to be involved in. Keith’s behaviour of late was deplorable of late and since his return after being held captive by Skathen, had begun to erode all of Allura’s self-control. He was more surprised over the fact that the rapture between the two did not come sooner.

Keith groaned as he entered the office. The Knights’ Lords regarded him calmly and bid him sit down. Keith locked his jaw, approached the desk, but remained standing, looking defiantly at them.

“Since you have returned, Akira, we have a job for you,” Argos announced.

Keith rolled his eyes. “Is there a retirement plan I can apply for or something? I’m sick to death of this. It’s wrecking my life.” *And now it’s getting on the way of my revenge.*

“Your next target is none other than Admiral Impruss,” Troy continued ignoring Keith. “Fury has been located on Doom. You’re to go and eliminate him from the Board.”

“I just escaped from Doom...”

“I’m aware of that,” Argos interrupted him. “I figured that since you’re impotent to eliminate the runt, we’ll send you to do a job that you might enjoy. After all, you don’t like Impruss, isn’t it correct?”

“Quite.” Mauld suddenly appeared beside Keith, resting his elbow on his shoulder.

“Dah!” Keith screamed and bounded away.

Argos and Troy had a similar exclamation of surprise and jumped back into their chairs at the sudden, unexpected appearance.

“The game is up,” Mauld announced. “The Queen’s Nite Club has deemed that The Alliance’s Knight Club should be the first to fall.”

“And you plan to do this alone?” Argos sneered, having recovered sufficiently, and drew a gun, pointing it at Mauld. “I think not. You’re on our turf. Outnumbered and out powered.”

“Methinks not.” Mauld nodded.

What had passed as dust motes by the window, suddenly formed into the stunning form of Vulpes. Mauld blinked languidly, his eyes focused inwards and, reaching out, aided Marzad in his Dimension Slide with Tiella.

“I present you with all the active members of the Queen’s Nite Club. As you can see, we have two Queens and three, rather aggressive, Pawns...” Mauld knitted his brow and glanced around. “Well, we were three when we first set off. I suppose we misplaced one along the way.” He shrugged. “No matter, what was that you were saying regarding being outnumbered?”

Argos locked his jaw. “You’re a Bishop!” he accused. “You can’t target another unless you’re deployed by the Abbot! You’re not part of this ridiculous game Skathen has started.”

“Technicalities.” Mauld waved a dismissing hand. “I extricated myself from the Abbey as did Lady D’ssat. We have pledged our allegiance to the King of...”

He was interrupted by something falling from the ceiling. He shifted his gaze and watched as Fenn stood up, brushed the dust off himself and straightened up his coat.

“Sorry about that.” He shook his hair back. “I got into a disagreement with the electrical wiring. I think it liked me. It wouldn’t let me go.”

Mauld smiled. “Well, here we are then. All the standing members of the Queen’s Nite Club are present. Please, do not let our motley appearance fool you.”

“Fenn?!” Keith asked aghast.

“Hya there, pretty boy!” Fenn waved.

“You...”

“Trust me,” Fenn interrupted. “This side of things is by far more exciting... And Mauld’s private wine stash is sinfully detectable!”

“Delectable,” Mauld corrected distractedly.

“Whatever! You knew what I meant...”

“Hush,” Mauld interrupted. “King Akira, why do you not... run along? We have no need for you here. You are just consuming our oxygen.”

Keith’s jaw dropped.

Fenn waved a dismissing hand in a rather regal fashion over his shoulder. “Shoo.”

Argos stood up. “What’s the meaning of this?!” he demanded.

“Let me spell it out to you.” Mauld crossed his arms. “As of today, there will be no more Knights’ Club. Our illustrious Queens are going to destroy you.” He turned back to Keith. “I would really recommend you leave. T’will get rather messy.”

Fenn took out his dagger and licked the blade sensuously. “Hum... It’s been long since I’ve had some good action.” His eyes gleamed psychotically.

Keith was about to accuse Mauld of tampering with Fenn’s mind but thought better. He knew that Fenn was immune to Psionic prodding. And he also knew that anyone wielding Psionics would be afflicted with an insufferable headache if tampering in a mad mind. He looked sullenly at Fenn before turning back to Mauld.

“You can’t do this!” Keith finally said. “What you’re planning will disrupt the Brotherhood...”

“The Brotherhood is no more,” Mauld interjected. “You will set an example by your fall.”

Keith looked at Tiella. “Surely you don’t plan to carry this out.”

She stared balefully at him. “Why not? Afraid of losing your bed and breakfast?”

Keith’s eyes widened in utter shock.

“Oh, don’t play the innocent, Your Majesty,” Tiella snarled in derision. “I know well enough that mother will never forgive you for what you did to Skathen. And know that I’ll not absolve you either!”

“And I have taken that vendetta upon myself.” Marzad cocked an eyebrow. “You will die by my hands.”

Mauld shrugged. “As you can see, the children are all for this, Akira. So why do you not make your presence scarce ere I lose my hold on their reins and this turns into an all out blood bath an- Oomph!” Mauld fell back.

The others took cover from the shots coming from Lord's guns. Keith tried to go to Tiella to protect her but succeeded only on being wounded on the leg by laser-fire and fell heavily beside Mauld who was clenching his bleeding shoulder.

"That's quite enough," Vulpes' husky voice cut the air, and she exploded into the countless form of the Monarks.

Argos and Troy startled when they were suddenly enveloped by a wall of fluttering, miniscule, butterfly-like shapes. They shot at them but the arcane creatures were immune to the mundane attack. Slowly, the circle began to tighten.

"Vulpes, no," Mauld commanded through gritted teeth, sitting up slowly.

Fenn poked his head from a drawer he had somehow managed to get into. Tiella and Marzad slithered from behind a filing cabinet. Keith rolled to a sitting position and peered at Tiella, assuring his daughter was unhurt.

Painfully, Mauld got to his feet. He considered healing himself but discarded the idea. He would need all the power in his Wells.

"Your first mistake was to attack me," Mauld stated tranquilly. "Now face the consequences of thine actions."

Without hesitation, he saw the purple Psionic energy grow, blend and Mesh. He rolled the power figuratively in his mind, allowing it to drain him completely. His head lolled back, his lips trembled in ecstasy as the power surged in its outmost limit and licentious ferocity. Even the passion of the flesh was diminished by this sensation. He had performed such feat only a few times in his life. He knew he would be vulnerable at the end, but his anger spoke louder than reason.

His body swayed gently to the raw and intense delight he was feeling. Regretfully, he straightened his head and opened his eyes. The world was a blur of hues shifting in the violet spectrum; the only time colour became visible to his vision.

"Vulpes! Move!" he yelled.

The Monarks fluttered away and began to reform again into the form of the woman. Mauld shuddered one more time in contentment and released the surge. He watched it as it bifurcated on its trajectory and targeted Argos and Troy. The two men cried out in horror and pain before sanguine fluids began to pour out of their facial orifices and eventually their lifeless bodies crumpled to the floor.

Mauld blinked slowly before succumbing to unconsciousness; completely drained by the action. Tiella stared in horror at the sight; the first murder she had ever witnessed. Her body convulsed and she leaned against the wall before she was violently sick. Marzad put a comforting hand on her shoulder trying to reassure her.

Fenn jumped out of the drawer and looked down at Keith. "You're next."

"That's quite enough," Marzad said quietly. "The King did not deploy us to eliminate any Knights. In fact, our orders are to simply capture them." He smiled lightly. "But since there's no more Knights' Club, that will no longer be necessary. Leave the moribund be. Help Vulpes carry Mauld back to the ship." Marzad helped Tiella up and led her out, followed by the others.

Keith clenched his hands in fury. *Moribund, is it? Boy, you've just signed your death warrant.* However, he remained still, shock from witnessing the vicious murder holding him in place. *Merla... And why should I think of you now?* He scowled, not understanding his mind.

"Mother." Skathen rushed over to the dock to greet the four Voltron Dirges. "Whatever are you doing here so far from Arus?"

"I'm to take part of the council, Skay." She hugged him tightly and pulled away eyeing him up and down. *You've aged so much in such a short time, Skay. You look almost a decade older than you really are... Is governing Doom draining you so much?*

"But this war doesn't involve Arus," he argued.

"It'll in the long run," Allura replied. "And you'll need all the power you can muster if you really wish to go against Zheppo. The Nephillims are strong; even without two Horde Leaders. The Empire also has a massive fleet of strong ships."

"The Brethan has moved to our side, mother. They possess powerful armaments and ships. We're not that helpless," Skathen countered.

"I don't take the credit from them; however, they are only one planet against seventeen Provinces. Even the Psions from Furie will not be enough..."

Skathen's brow creased in concentration, making him look even older. "I wasn't aware that the Diamond and Milky Way Galaxies were grinding so badly." He paused. "I always thought Garrison was there to protect everyone."

"And who taught you that?" Allura smirked humourlessly.

"Key..." Skathen slapped his forehead. "Okay, dumb moment there."

"Skay, I never wanted you to go into the Alliance Academy. I always tried to develop Arus' own training facility. But Keith always felt that since Garrison was already in place and boasted more expertise, we shouldn't be bothered. Honestly, I wanted you to go to the Drule Academy as your father had, but how could I have possibly managed that? Besides, I was too scared of you being corrupted by their ideals. When I found out that you went on your own, I was very worried. I thought you were lost to me. But I see the Drules helped you."

Skathen nodded. "So you have recanted the Alliance."

"No." Allura shrugged. "But by being here, they will file me as such. Many years ago Mauld, in an attempt to secure Arus' safety, married me. Although it was bogus, the Alliance didn't approve of this action. They raged war on us... an incursion" She was lost in thought. "That's when Marzad lost his mother... I don't know what happened. I was utterly undermined by the actions and I had to help Keith out of the Fortress."

Skathen took a deep breath steeling himself. "There's so much I still don't know... Mother, are we ever going to know peace?"

"Hum..." Allura smiled suddenly as the proximity alarms began to blare. "Ah, right on time."

"What...?" Skathen began.

"Sven is arriving with a fleet from Pollux and the other eleven planets from the Diamond Galaxy."

"What do you know." Lance smirked approaching them, followed by the others. "Sven's coming to Doom on his own will and the planet is not even known as the 'Valley of Bliss!'"

Pidge laughed amused. "Maybe we could hold a naming election."

"Are we getting the cotton candy and all that stuff?" Hunk wiggled his brows.

Allura and Skathen stared at the men puzzled.

"Long story." Lance waved a dismissing hand.

Skathen squinted at the darkened sky until a communicator went off.

"Skay, that's Prime Minister Sven Erickson of Pollux asking permission to land," Tiella announced cheerfully.

"Ah..." Skathen shook his head. "We can't harbour that many ships." He scratched his head. "Tell him to direct a third of the ships to Furie, another to Brethan and land with the rest here." He looked bewildered. "I'll bet Mauld is behind this." He looked suspiciously around. "When does he find time? Even half dead he's still causing mayhem."

Allura's eyes widened in shock. "Half dead?" she asked cautiously.

"Well, he was dumb enough to release a major Psionic surge and he drained himself into oblivion. He's alright. He just needs rest. I called up Viceroy Bokar and he came over to inspect Mauld and said it was natural and to give him a few weeks. That's when I also found out that Mauld had already set the wheels into motion and that he was trying to unite a bunch of people to fall the Empire." Skathen looked annoyed. "Of course, he never told *me* anything," he huffed.

Allura nodded in relief.

Skathen crossed his arms and tapped his foot.

"What?" Allura looked innocently at him.

"What is it, mom? What are you hiding?" He squinted at her through his bangs, as if trying to peer into her mind and find the truth by himself.

"Nothing, Skay." She smiled and ruffled his hair, pleased to see how young the action had made him look. "Let's go inside and get something to eat. I'm starving."

"You have a crush on Mauld!" Skathen accused.

"No!"

"You like him?" Skathen hazarded.

"Whatever makes you say that?"

“By the way you looked all panicked and stuff... Mom... It’s cool and stuff, but...”

“But...”

“Well...” Skathen flapped his arms. “What’s with him anyway? For someone who’s supposed to be the Almighty Evil In The Flesh Reincarnated, everyone likes him! Heck! Even I like him...” He looked around and lowered his voice, before adding, “Just don’t tell anyone that.”

She hooked her arm on his and began to lead him into the castle. “Cam’on, Skay...” She smiled. “I’m starving and you’re not being a very attentive host.”

“Ladies, gentlemen, I thank you for attending...” Skathen began before the sound of the door opening interrupted him. He turned around and scowled. “You! Go back to bed!”

Mauld shook his head. The Psion looked ragged; his hair fell listless, framing a face that was almost gaunt. His eyes were dull and he walked slowly towards a chair, the action ostensibly taxing his limited resources.

“Your Majesty,” Mauld began haltingly. “This has gone beyond being simply an issue concerning Doom alone. This is not only a move for freedom for all the rebels being harassed by the Empire, but also the freedom of the Drule Provinces. Once we efface the Empire, everything will shatter and I admit to feel trepidation of the calamity that may result.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes as if trying to will himself to remain conscious.

“Admiral, I can transfer some energy to you,” Bokar offered quietly.

Mauld shook his head. “I am afraid that anything, no matter how beneficial it may sound, will simply cause more distress than actually aid me. Howe’er, I cordially thank you, Viceroy.”

“Then how should we proceed with this?” Marshal Kheezor asked.

“First, we must have another to ascend to the Emperor’s place upon his fall. One who carries his blood and whom we can trust.” Mauld opened his eyes slowly.

“And who, pray tell, would that be?” Sven shook his head. “That’s an absurdity!”

“No.” Mauld swallowed, flinching lightly as he continued to battle to remain cognisant. “We have the candidate within this room.”

Skathen’s head dropped. “Oh just spit it out! The suspense is killing me!”

Mauld turned his head slowly to face his son. “How would you like to be Emperor? At least until everything is settled once again.”

Marzad crossed his arms on top of the table and looked flatly at Mauld. “You’re just not funny, you know. I mean, as far as jokes go, that was just silly.”

“I kid thee not,” Mauld retorted in the same even tone.

“How’s this possible exactly?” Skathen rested his head on his hand, elbow on the table. “I mean, he’s your son... Oh dear... Why do I have a feeling there was some sort of accident?”

Mauld’s nature responded and he chuckled lightly. “A doozy, let me assure you.” He sighed. “I am Emperor’s Zheppo’s illegitimate son; which makes you His Excellency’s grandson, Marzad.”

“When did you find this out?” Allura asked amazed.

“I have eer known this. I just ne’er had a need to reveal this to anyone, including the Emperor. He is still quite ignorant of this fact. He tricked a Mischur female into his bed and she bore me. I, howe’er, prompted her immature death during my birth and her family, disgusted by a child being born out of wedlock, sent me to the Drule Empire for me to be killed or looked after by another. They cared not which.”

Skathen snorted. “Story of my life,” he commented.

“I feel faint.” Marzad’s azure complexion looked lurid.

“You will survive...” Mauld stopped and let out a slight gasp. “I will withdraw from this meeting at this time.” He turned to Skathen. “Your Majesty, I would suggest you formulate the war plans with the others but do not spend too much time with the politics. I will resume that when I recover.”

Skathen nodded at the guards at the door to help Mauld back to his chamber. “Admiral, if you keep exhausting yourself you’re going to die. You’ll be of no use that way.”

Grudgingly, Mauld allowed himself to be half carried, half led out of the room. “As you command, Your Majesty. T’was folly leaving my bed.”

Skathen waited until he was gone before turning his attention back to the others. “What’s our strength? Can we, realistically, go against the Empire and hope to win? Or at least weaken them enough so that a second attack can be carried out successfully?”

Sven touched a button on the table they sat around, which doubled as a video screen. Numbers rolled across briefly before stopping and displaying the combined strength of all of the planets.

“As you can see, we have a fair number,” Sven began. “The four Voltron Dirges, Abaddon and its Horde and the Nephillims left behind on Arus by Mauld. They’ll work well against the Drule Nephillims. Brethan and the other planets from the Diamond Galaxy have heavy ships which can disable their counterpart in the Drule fleet.

Skathen nodded. “Griefe is good for mass destruction...” He looked thoughtful. “It’s also very manoeuvrable considering her size and all.”

“I can take Blue Dirge,” Tiella suddenly said. “I’m sick to death of being left behind every time something happens. Besides, five Dirges will help even out our odds.”

Allura nodded and turned to Sven.

“It’s here,” he answered the unasked question. “I knew someone would end up taking it.” Sven smiled at Tiella. “I’m glad to see that it’s you. Blue has always worked well for me and your mother.”

“I will be with Abaddon,” Vulpes announced. “The Dirge I’m building is only twenty percent completed. Mauld will, most likely, be with Fury or he can take Makkiel.”

Allura studied the woman carefully. *So you’re Lotor’s sister. You don’t look much like him though you seem to be just as a good engineer as he was. She looked thoughtful. I’ve been warned that you don’t talk much, but I would like to sit down with you and just hear about Lotor when you lived together. Allura knitted her brows. But then, this probably would only bring you pain... And that scar on your chest? Was that Zarkon who did that to you?*

“The Psions will be useless until we gain access to the Main,” Bokar informed, interrupting Allura’s thoughts. “If we attack through the vid comms we’re going to be very weak by the time it comes down to the actual ground battle. I know General Sincine was able to hurl energy forces strong enough to fall ships, but he was the strongest of our kind and no other boasts that kind of potency.”

Skathen nodded. “The armaments the ships are carrying should be enough to deal with the aerial battle.” He turned to Hunk. “You were exposed to my father’s work, if I’m not mistaken.”

“For a time,” Hunk concurred.

“Would it be possible for you to help my aunt finish the repair work on Griefe and make a few modifications? I know that my father planned for the ship to carry only six missiles at any given time, but I think nine would be better.”

“You do realise that carrying six missiles is risky enough,” Hunk pointed out.

“Having the metallurgic plants and the core material to produce them is also a rather dangerous prospect and yet the ship is outfitted with that.” Skathen shrugged. “Griefe was built to withstand attack. If she founders it won’t be because of the missiles. That will just add to the fireworks.”

Kheezor nodded. “His Majesty is correct in this assessment. And having three extra missiles carrying the power that Griefe seems to produce would prove quite helpful in battle.”

“We could also equip the other boats with them,” Lance reasoned. “I mean, if it’s so powerful and all. The Dirges have them in a smaller scale and it proved quite a good addition against the fights against Doom.”

“Then there was the small problem when we ran out.” Hunk didn’t look amused. “And we couldn’t manufacture anymore because Lotor had the plan for the core material here.”

Skathen smiled. “You also need high amounts of LaserChem to power them and unfortunately you need a place like Doom to get the right chemicals. We’ll stock up on armaments. The heart of the planet is being harvested for that purpose.”

“How long until the resources run out?” Marzad asked, finally recovering from the shock of being proclaimed Zheppo’s grandson.

Skathen shrugged. “According to all reports, the planet just seems to produce the nuclear waste on its own.”

“But it’s also been noted that the nuclear holocaust that Doom is undergoing is diminishing.” Vulpes arched an eyebrow. “The planet is certainly much warmer than it was when I was a kid. How long until it’s finally purified? I looked at the reports and the bacteria seem to be doing an excellent job of cleaning everything up rather effectively.” She crossed her arms. “You’re counting on something that may not be here for very long.”

“I’m no geologist, but according from everything that I’ve been able to dig out from the archives, Doom was always a nuclear time bomb but it also sported seasons independently from a celestial unit. I mean, it’s no secret that Province Eight is the only one with four seasons now, but Doom used to be like that once upon a time. The nucleus of the planet provided the planet with seasonal changes. I don’t understand it all too well myself, but I’m not worried about depleting the resources. I think it will last for a long time yet.”

Marzad nodded. “Harvesting the metal and the chemical is contributing to our defences as we have witnessed in the last battle. Though I must admit, being a Psion and all, that using the metal as a weapon is almost heartless. I mean, it’s alive.”

Bokar knitted his brow puzzled.

“I have thought of that,” Skathen admitted. “We’ll use plain steel for armaments. It’s just as lethal and leave the... er, what do we call it?”

“Didn’t you father find it?” Sven noted.

“Yeah.”

“Lotorium or something.” Sven shrugged.

“That sounds like what you call something that’s been dead for a while,” Lance quipped.

“D’ssatium?” Pidge suggested.

“Fine,” Skathen continued. “Anyway, we’ll use the D’ssatium for the creation of crafts and anything that will interact with another living being.” He paused. “As soon as Mauld recovers enough we’ll begin the attacks.”

Bokar looked thoughtful. “He should be up to par in about a month. He won’t be fully recovered but he’ll be strong enough to lead Fury’s band so long as he doesn’t employ any Psionics.”

Skathen concluded the meeting and watched as the room emptied except for Allura, Sven, Lance and Marzad who remained behind. He looked quizzically at them.

“Who is truly ruling this planet?” Allura cocked her head. “You or Mauld?”

Skathen sighed. “I don’t know anymore. He’s right about many things; I don’t know of much that’s occurring. All I have is text book knowledge and that’s not going to be enough, especially when dealing with people like Marshal Kheezor. In fact, ascending to power was a dreadful accident.”

“I’ll say.” Marzad shook his head.

“The way Mauld was treating you earlier, it sounded almost as if he’s the true ruler and not you,” Sven commented. “If you don’t feel up to this, I understand, but how much can you trust Mauld? I mean, he showed up at your door step offering to help destroy the man he was sworn to. Find you not that just a little strange?”

Lance’s lips crooked to one side. “If you ask me, this is awfully fishy.”

“I don’t know what to make of him,” Marzad spoke quietly. “He captured Tiella, Fenn and I and when he heard that Skathen’s life had been threatened, he simply released us to find Skathen and then aided us in the process of curing him.” He shrugged. “I don’t think it had anything to do with the fact that he discovered I’m his son. He barely speaks with me.”

“Not that he hasn’t tried,” Skathen shot. “You’re more closed up than a Martian clam.”

“That’s gotta be really closed...” Lance stopped and scowled. “What?! What the heck is a Martian clam?”

“They are about... er... this big,” Skathen held his hands out. “And about yay wide...” He made another gesture of measurement with his hands. “And...” He hung his head. “I don’t know! I just made it up. You people are not supposed to question me like that!” He flapped his arms affronted.

“Well, I for one would like to know just what exactly you’re comparing me to.” Marzad’s tone was logical.

“Anyway,” Allura interrupted. “Skay, how much can you trust Mauld?”

“Mother.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. It seems like everything is going wrong. People I once trusted betrays me and people I thought were my enemies are now my allies.” Skathen took a deep breath. “But I suppose that’s the way with war. Everything shifts sides as it progresses. All I would really like is to go back to Arus, build a nice lab and just be myself. Instead I’m stuck in this planet looking after people who don’t accept me and facing a war that I can’t possibly hope to win.”

Allura hugged him tightly. “Try and rest, Skathen. You’re going to need all your strength very soon. The building preparations are being overlooked by Marzad and Tiella.”

“And surprisingly, we haven’t had any rebellions,” Marzad added. “You were scolding Mauld, but it’s not like you listened when you were hurt.”

Skathen locked his jaw, chided. “Very well. Sven, if you could look after the outfitting of all the ships with LaserChem missiles this will give us a great advantage over the Drule. My aunt can show you the schematics of the chemical and laser mixture. She inherited that Physics strand that my father had. The power plants are at full production and you’ll find all you need.” He turned to Lance and Allura. “And I would ask you to train Tiella in Blue Dirge. She understands the Sentinel, but she doesn’t have experience.”

“That was one command that you didn’t need to issue.” Allura chuckled. “Cam’on, hot shot.” She tugged Lance’s sleeve.

Skathen watched them all leave before rubbing his temples, willing a headache away.

“Keith...” Graham stood up slowly.

Keith entered the office and stared firmly at his uncle. “It’s no secret that the Diamond Galaxy has betrayed us several times,” he commenced. “I’ve come here to let you know that they’ve involved themselves in the Drule internal affairs. The outer upstart planets of the Dark Ring are about to war the core to overthrow Zheppo and I doubt it’s going to stop there. I’ve a feeling that they’re going to move against us right after.”

“You know this for certain?”

“About the Drule war? Yes. As for the other supposition, well, it’s just a deduction.” Keith sat down took a cigar from the holder on Graham’s desk. “Queen Allura has detached most of the force from the Diamond Galaxy and moved them into the Dark Ring. I don’t know what they intend exactly other than usurper the Empire. Given their ambition, I honestly don’t think that they’re going to stop there.” He took a deep drag out of the cigar, trying not to look disgusted from the taste. “I would recommend we ready our forces.”

Graham studied his nephew subtly. He was certain something troubled Keith enough to have caused him to reach out for the cigar so deliberately. He thought sadly of everything that had happened to Keith during the years and admired the younger man’s constitution. Despite all the trials Keith had been through, he was still healthy and strong; though his eyes now held a perpetual lunacy. He had a feeling the action of smoking was unconscious and maybe a way to stifle his nervousness.

“And why not just go to them?” Graham smiled lightly. “We could plan the attack so that when they engage the Drule from the front, we could attack their rear and flanks. Between the Drule and us, they would be crushed.” He paused, still eyeing Keith furtively. “King Skathen has gotten out of hand. He has destroyed the Knight’s Club and from the little information I’ve been able to gather from the spies, the Parliament of Rooks is practically defunct. They have no Rooks left.”

Keith nodded. “And yet, the Bishop’s Monastery is untouched.” He arched an eyebrow. “How convenient.” He regarded his cigar as if he hadn’t realised that he had had it in his hand. “And Mauld seems to be Skathen’s Admiral now.” He put the cigar out. “It appears to me that he has Skathen just as brainwashed as everyone else who comes in contact with him...” His eyes went a darker shade of black as he looked analytically at Graham. “He was on Arus about a month ago... After his departure, Allura voided our marriage, yet again, and she took arms against the Drule. How coincidental.”

“So you think that he’s done to her what he did to you,” Graham stated.

“Hum...” Keith looked thoughtful. “I don’t think it was quite as grave, but I have little doubt it was some sort of Psionic mischief.”

“Hum...” Graham looked thoughtful for a few moments before focusing on Keith again. “Go to Hawkins and assemble the forces. The Explorer and Vehicle Voltron will lead the forces under your command ... Captain Keith Førstenheüser-Akira.”

Keith's lips twisted into a wry smile. “Aye, sir,” he saluted and left. *You will all fall...* he mused. *You betraying dogs will know defeat and I'll have my revenge.*

* “Black Circle” still unwritten.