

Voltron New concept teaser chapter:

Prologue Hammered on the Anvil...

"Why come to me for this?" Said a voice on the other side of the door from where Keith Kogane was sitting, his dull eyes staring at nothing. "Is there no one else that can take him in? Even if you put aside my antipathy toward the boy's father I am not good with children, especially young children."

"You were named in the will as someone who could look after him sir and are the closest living relative as well," said another voice, the voice of the man who had acted as Keith's guardian for a time while enacting his parent's will.

Keith still couldn't believe it, his parents, both gone. They said it was a car crash, but he watched the news. There was no car crash. Some terrorist group or other were attacking any military people they could, and both of his parents had been retired Galaxy Defense Force officers. Indeed, Keith knew his father had been wondering if he should throw his name into the ring for the planetary governor position in the next few months.

"I don't want him. Send him to those damned orphanages the Galaxy Alliance runs. Perhaps I would be willing to take him in when he is old enough to be worth the time to train rather than so young he has to be looked after. Until then I would rather not look at the evidence of that gaijin scum's involvement with my daughter," said the callous voice that Keith had only heard once before this.

It was his mother's father, a Japanese man down to his toenails his mother had said, who looked down on her for marrying a gaijin and moving away from Earth with him. He had no idea what that word meant but it was evident that the man had no wish to be near Keith, and Keith couldn't decide whether or not he cared about that at the moment.

He moved away from the inner wall to the window of the small room, his eyes still staring without seeing anything, remembering the last time he'd seen his parents alive. He could remember their faces, the laughter in their eyes as they went out for dinner together.

Then he saw the face of his babysitter, an older man named Sacral, a grizzle noncommissioned officer who had served with his father faithfully as something called a batman. He hadn't understood what that meant the first time he'd heard it, but Sacral had been his friend ever since Keith had shown interest in learning martial arts.

"Very well," his grandfather said in a cold tone of voice. I will take him in, and

we will see if he is worth anything. But if I decide otherwise, I will send him to the nearest orphanage. Money is of no interest to me, only my name and its legacy."

A moment later the door opened and a tall, old man with haggard features and a thin, spare frame stood in the doorway staring down at Keith. For a moment, his eyes were hard and dangerous but they seemed to soften as they took in Keith's body and his features. "At least there is not much of the gaijin in your appearance, we will see about your soul soon enough. I am Akira. You will call me Sensei or Kogane-dono. Is that understood?"

Keith slowly nodded, not taking his eyes away from the man, who seemed to grimace at that. "I see we will have to teach you manners. Come. We will return to Earth."

At any other time Keith might've been excited by the idea of leaving New London. But at the moment he was just too emotionally exhausted to do anything but simply nod, following his grandfather out the door.

OOOOOOO

Allura looked up from her trying to read a book on meditation and energy flows that her father had given her as the door to the royal library burst open. For a moment she thought it might be nanny returning from her sister's soon, which would have been bad. She was supposed to be in her department lessons right now, rather than reading a book even Allura had to admit was little beyond her at the moment. *Still, I'm only eleven, just wait, I'll get there eventually! I'll be a great Sorceress just like Great Grandma Misteria!*

But it wasn't Nanny. In the doorway stood Coran, one of her father's most trusted advisers. The man, whose goofy mustache and smiling eyes always made her smile, now looked almost panicked and that drove a dart of fear into Allura's heart. "My lady, come with me at once! We've got to get you out of here."

Standing up quickly, Allura moved towards the man, putting the book to one side her blue eyes wide and concerned as she tried to inject some calm into her voice as she had seen her father do despite starting to tremble in fear. "Whatever is the matter Coran?"

"I'll tell you later your highness," he said quickly, grabbing her hand. "We have to go, they're nearly here! Come!"

"Who is nearly here?" Allura asked quickly, pulling away for a second to grab up some of her father's most precious books, ones that their family members had

written in their own personal language about the lions, and other things of that nature. "What is going on?! And where is Father?"

"Your father, you... he's..." Coran shook his head, then said softly. "He's dead highness. Voltron is dead! We still don't have all of the information, but there are no life signs showing up in the blue lion, and it the only lion that has returned so far!"

For a moment, it didn't register and then the tears came. Now both her parents were gone. Her mother had died years ago, giving birth to a baby who would have been her little brother if they had both lived. But something had gone wrong, something Queen Olivia had eaten she'd heard, and both mother and baby had died. *And now, now father's gone to.*

Allura wanted to just curl up and cry, but she couldn't. Instead Coran hustled her out of the room, pulling her along faster and faster, so fast she eventually tripped. Coran picked her up quickly, and raced on heading not towards the main doors, but towards the doors that lead into the kitchen. Allura had been in there a few times, indeed she'd been in there only that day, grabbing some food for herself from the helpful maids. With Nanny gone a lot of the restrictions on her movement had disappeared. Though Allura loved Nanny, the older woman having helped to raise her over the years, it seemed to Allura that she had a lot more fun when the woman wasn't actually around.

They quickly reached the kitchen, and raced through it. Allura looked around and noticed that the crews on duty were also running around, stuffing food into bags and boxes. Several even moved to join them, smiling wanly at Allura before turning their attention to Coran, waiting orders.

Before Coran could speak there was a loud explosion from above them, and a sound she had never heard before a sort of grinding noise, followed by a massive boom. "What's going on?" Allura whispered into Coran's pointed ear, the tears returning to her eyes as she asked, "And, and who killed Father?"

"Zarkon your highness," Coran replied, before barking out orders to the people around them and racing on. As they were entering a secret passage Allura had never seen he went on. "King Zarkon of the Drule had them killed. He had Voltron itself killed."

The rest of that day was a blur to the young princess who eventually cried herself to sleep, too emotionally and physically exhausted to remain awake. When she woke up, she found herself in a tiny dark cave but sleeping on a relatively comfortable sofa. She curled up and tried to go back to sleep, to make this bad dream go away, but it didn't work. With red-rimmed eyes the young princess then tried to read the books

she had grabbed with a helpful nightlight someone had left there for her, only to find she couldn't concentrate on the words.

Leaving the sofa, she moved to the entrance to the tiny cave, sticking her head out into the larger cave beyond. There she found Coran speaking to several other men and women and hid there for a moment trying to overhear some of the conversation but she didn't understand a lot of the words being used. She understood tone however, and whatever was going on was very bad, almost as bad as her father being dead and Voltron being gone.

Annihilation, bombing, slaves. The last word she knew, but the others, the others sounded scary, until she eventually looked them up in a dictionary later during that first week. When she did, they became horrifying.

Coran tried to look after her, but most of the time Allura was left to a few of the younger maids who had come with them. Soon even they began to have other duties as the weeks went on, and more people joined them in the caves in ones and twos. Men and women both joined them coming from all walks of life from what Allura could tell from their clothing, and they all brought news Coran had to hear.

Around two months passed like that after the initial invasion, as Allura now knew it as. Now Allura was left almost alone at times, sitting in a corner of a small cave lit by a light that she had taken from her father's room days before he had to leave on the mission which eventually killed him. It was a Royal toy, used to teach students how to generate energy, but Allura couldn't do it just yet. Playing with it though gave her something to do, since every time she tried to offer help or ask to be allowed out she was firmly rebuffed by whatever maid was assigned to her.

They were willing to let her go around the caves under escort, but weren't willing to actually let her do anything. At the moment Allura knew that had less to do with her being a princess, after all what did that matter now, than her being a young girl among a lot of people who were nearly all strangers.

There were a few other children her age among them but not many and only one other girl. She was a fat whiny little thing who had tried to start a fight with Allura the moment they met. Since Allura had then broken her arm, the two of them were kept apart, and the few boys were deemed unsuitable to be near Allura by Coran.

Eventually however Allura grew bored with her attempts to read or play with her toy and moved out into the rest of the cavern network. Some of the caverns weren't actual caverns Allura knew, they had been hollowed out on purpose, added to what had already existed here in order to provide what her father had called a bunker, another word she had to look up the meaning of.

She didn't agree with the name at the time. She thought a super-secret base was a much better description for it, not having understood at the time the serious nature of the work behind such a project. Now Allura did, and she regretted her earlier naïveté, although the name she had chosen for it was still an apt one.

As she looked around in frustration, trying to think of something else she could do, Allura heard the sound of a cat. A large cat was somewhere nearby growling to itself or rumbling in a tone Allura thought meant distress, though of course she wasn't sure. She looked at the other people in the small cave with her, but no one else seemed to hear it. That was strange Allura decided, and she tried to ignore it for time, turning back to the dictionary in her hands, but the sound didn't go away.

Eventually Allura's curiosity got the better of her, and she set her book down resolutely. She smiled at the nearest maid, who was tending to some laundry nearby and said, "I'm just going to go walking for a bit."

"Your highness, Coran asked that you remain here," the maid said looking a little hesitant.

"I won't go outside, I now I can't leave the caves." Allura said, not for the first time rolling her eyes. "But that doesn't mean I can't explore the caves themselves."

The maid, one of the younger ones who most often looked the other way when Allura was being naughty or 'acting beneath her station' as Nanny put it, smiled at her, nodded and set the laundry down. "I'll go with you then if it pleases your majesty,"

"It does indeed, thank you Kathy," Allura replied with a small smile. The girl's drroll tone would have made her laugh, but Allura didn't join her. Allura hadn't laughed ever since Coran had told her about her father.

She watched, her small smile slipping into a frown as the older girl strapped a gun to her waist. "Kathy, can you even use that?" The question was innocent: there was no malice or fear in it, just surprise.

"Oh I've been learning your highness." Kathy answered grimly.

"I might ask you to teach me then," Allura said with a sigh, sounding far wearier, and far older, than any eleven year old should. "It certainly seems a more necessary skill to learn now than politics or land ownership or whatever I was supposed to be reading before all this happened."

"Probably," Kathy said with a small smile of her own for the younger girl. "Now I believe you said something about exploring?" The two of them left the small cave and headed out, into the larger cavern complex.

Kathy didn't know where they were going, she was following Allura, who was

walking around randomly for a time until she decided on direction. "What are you doing your highness?"

"Following a noise," Allura said, smiling. "There is some kind of cat down here, I can hear it, even if none of the adults can. I wonder if there were other kids in here would they hear it too? I know that you adults lose your hearing when you grow old."

Kathy startled herself by laughing aloud at that. "That only happens when we're very old your highness. Are you sure you're not imagining it?"

"Yep," Allura said with a smile making a little popping noise when she said the word in a way she had learned from one of the castle guards. For some reason the tiny adventure she was on had started to raise her spirits. But the thought of the man who had taught her that sobered her. *I wonder if he made it out of the Castle?*

The two of them traveled for quite some time, so far that they left the area of the tunnels currently being used behind and Kathy was tempted to turn back. But Allura insisted on continuing and eventually they followed the source of the noise to a large underground lake.

Staring at it, Kathy shook her head. "Your highness, I don't have a swimsuit and I can't remember the last time you went swimming," She said warningly.

"The cats in here somewhere, but it wouldn't go in the water wouldn't?" Allura mused, looking around, then cocking her head. "Oh, but it doesn't sound concerned or worried any more. I guess it could be fishing but I don't see..."

"AHHH" Kathy shrieked as two wide yellow eyes suddenly lit up in the water. They quickly rose to the surface pushing the water aside in a great bow wave and Kathy scrambled back, trying to grab at Allura.

Allura however didn't shriek and didn't move back. Instead she laughed for the first time in months, racing forward as the blue lion's head broke the water, it's massive purr now so loud it filled the grotto. "Blue!"

OOOOOOO

It was seven on one, an odd way to train anyone it had to be said, though the one was a little older looking than the seven facing him, at least older than the other humans. When it came to other species, it was often very hard to tell. Two of them looked a cross between a man and a hawk but with longer beaks and webbed hands rather than claws, and the other had heavy large shoulders and a shark's head on a somewhat circular body. He held a staff in a forward thrusting position. Another staff was held in the hands of a human cross ways, flicking this way and that.

The man in the center of the room bowed to his opponents then brought his hands up, turning slightly to provide a smaller profile, waiting for them to make the first move. He didn't have to wait long, as the entire group charged. One man moved to either side of their target while four charge straight on as the seventh circle circled around the others, trying to get behind their target.

Their target however didn't stand still. Instead he charged to not to one of the attackers trying to encircle him as they might have suspected, but directly at the four attacking him from the front.

He skidded to a stop as two of them thrust their blunted staffs forward. Dodging to one side he let one staff pass him, while blocking the other to the same side with one hand, kicking out hard at another man who tried to come in from behind, pushing the man with the pole arm into another man who fell sideways tangling all four of them up for a brief moment before whirling away, grabbing the arm of a man coming at him from behind and shoulder throwing him forward.

An instant later twisted, taking a kick to the side but carrying the foot away with his hand that little at its actual force landed. The kicker found himself off balance, and unable to block the palm thrust that took him in the center of the chest, throwing him backwards to land gasping for air on the mat.

But then the four that he had initially charged had sorted themselves out once more. They came in slower now, with two of their number down. The man who had been circling also came in with them charging for word aiming a punch at his opponent's unarmed back.

But the man being attacked knew he was there, and mule kicked backwards, sending him flying backwards with a cry of pain, the kick taking him as he was in full extension from his punch.

As he straightened up the defender nearly took a staff end to the face, but he grabbed the end of it holding it still for just a second, long enough to move to the side, taking another blow to the chest from another man, but returning one of his own at the same time with his free hand.

A flashing kick shattered the second staff, sending the shark-like alien reeling backwards as the first staff user attempted to attack the target from the side only to find that the man moved with him, twisting around his thrust. Grabbing the weapon, the defender fell backwards onto the mat and kicked out with both feet sending the second staff user away with a whoosh of displaced air.

Sweeping the pole on the side with one hand, he caught another man on the shin, dumping him with a cry of pain to the floor before rolling backward to avoid a

stomp kick. Once his feet were under him he leaped upright dropping the pole. The last of the seven men came in, exchanging a few punches but before a punch took him in the jaw sending him to the floor with a crash.

"Come on guys!" the victorious man said, standing back and staring down at them all with disapproval. "We've been over this! Talk to one another, for God's sake! Come up with some kind of strategy other than charge or encircle. Also, the longer the fight went on, the more mistakes crept into your personal styles. Shareef, what the heck was up with extending so much to get a punch in? That's rookie stuff."

"Yes sensei a thousand yeses sensei," said one of them, the man who had been shoulder thrown as he winced, shaking his shoulder and neck out. "Damn Keith, you'd were teaching this course instead of commander Burton."

The so-named Keith shrugged? "You were the ones to ask for extra training. Now come on let's try this again. And if I see any mistakes in your personal styles this time I'm going to force the lot of you to do some hill runs."

This elicited a groan from all of them, even the nonhumans. But thankfully for the seven students their impromptu lesson was interrupted by a buzzer going off followed by a voice intoning from a nearby intercom. "Cadet Kogane, report to the Commandant's office, Cadet Kogane report to the Commandant's office."

The seven younger cadets blinked, looking at the man they had had been fighting. "Did you do something wrong again?"

"I haven't done anything wrong ever in terms of GG rules, so no." Keith said with a faint frown at the jibe. "I don't know what this is about. Maybe my after-graduation assignment?"

The others nodded at that. "Is it true you're going to be breveted straight up to commander?" Said one of them, pushing himself off the floor and groaning lightly, clutching his chest. Training with Keith was tough, but the seven of them had slowly begun to pull ahead in their combat classes, so he supposed it was the pain was worth it. *Yeah, keep telling yourself that.*

"Yes, unfortunately," Keith said with a sigh, his frown deepening. The other six shut up quickly, knowing this was a sore point for Keith, though not entirely understanding the reasons behind that.

"You better go, we'll clean up here." Said the one Keith had addressed as Shareef.

The older boy nodded his thanks to that, then ran for the shower. A few minutes later, he stood in front of the Commandant's desk, his cadet's uniform sparkling clean, the quartet of awards he had won over the past five years as a cadet

displayed proudly on his chest. "Cadet Kogane reporting as ordered sir!"

The Commandant looked up from some papers at the cadet then nodded sharply. "I presume you were late because you had to stop to take a shower? Training with some freshman again?"

"Sir yes sir on both counts!" Keith replied, staring at a point over the man's head, still standing at attention.

"At ease then," Admiral Graham, the Commandant of Galaxy Garrison said shaking his head. "This has to do with your graduation mission."

Keith did not relax though his stance change to the at ease position. "Yes sir, I figured it would."

Graham stared at him for a time then decided to be blunt about this. "Well Cadet, there's no easy way to say this. You have been reassigned from the Space Exploration teams."

For a moment that didn't register, then it did and Keith's face changed into a snarl of frustration. "Sir! I have made no secret that I wanted to be a space explorer since the moment I joined Galaxy Garrison, pushing the boundaries of known space is my dream! Why..."

"That will do cadet," Graham said, a snap in his voice that pulled Keith up sharply. "This is not a decision that was easy for us to come to, but none of your graduating class is going to join the Space Exploration division. Indeed, funding to that division is being slashed to the bone and most of its personnel reassigned. You personally are being seconded into the Space Scouts."

Keith frowned at that mellowing somewhat. "The border with the Drule Sir?" *At least I'll be doing something important.* He'd wanted to do his duty his way, yet he had to admit that fighting the Drule was more important than exploration.

With a sigh the admiral inputted some commands into his desk computer, and an image Keith had seen hundreds of times before popped into existence over his desk.

The Drule and Galactic shared a border around seven hundred thousand parsecs long though of course in space that kind of thing was a misnomer. There were also semi-autonomous zones situated to either side of that direct border, the largest being the Denubian sector. Being a major history buff Keith always thought the map of known space looked somewhat like the map of Europe during the Cold War era, with the Denubian Sector taking the part of an unaligned Scandinavia.

Indeed that description was quite apt since the two largest galactic powers in known space had been dancing around going to full war against one another for quite some time, skirmishes and feints being the way of it. Their strengths were almost as

opposed to one another as their general policies towards their people or their actual governmental styles: the Drule consisted of loosely aligned feudal principalities and the Galactic Alliance supposedly a republic, but Keith knew not all members were created equal and there was a tremendous amount of corruption just below the surface. And worse, not all its member races saw the Drule as a threat they had to truly fight.

In space technology, in starships, the Galaxy Defense Force had the edge. Their starfighters were better, their ships were better. But Galaxy Garrison didn't actually have any kind of standing, unified, army. Several of its members had standing armies but not many and there were actual laws in place to keep the GDF from forming a planetary arm. The Galactic Alliance had no real need of a large land based army up to this point, instead getting by with specialists and a crack marine force.

But, the Drule had a real army consisting of androids along with more ships, far more. While the GDF were constrained by their budget and the sometimes vicious infighting in the Senate, the Drule were sharply expansionistic, with much of their economy geared towards war, uncaring of the individual rights of the people.

And they had robeasts.

When he had first heard about those creatures Keith hadn't believed they really existed, but he had since seen newsreels of a few fights between a robeasts and a GDF fleet and knew them to be true. If the robeasts were allowed to close with any ship in space they could tear them apart, though their long-range weaponry wasn't up to GDF standards. Worse however was the terror aura they created, a field of utter fear that somehow spread from them through space or air. Nobody had figured out how they were doing it, but getting within a certain area around a robeast caused people to simply lose control, flee battle or commit suicide to get away from the fear.

The coffin ships that brought them to the battlefield were also a problem, since they could somehow remain either undetected or come out of hyperspace far closer to a planet than larger ships could. And once on the ground, any defense simply broke. The Galactic Alliance had no idea what the robeasts were, no two of them were alike, but they were utterly deadly.

Another button was pushed, and the map changed from the one Keith had seen before to another, newer version. It showed several dozen systems had changed hands, including several Keith hadn't known about. One of them was a GDF naval hub, which explained why an entire cluster had seemingly fallen out of contact from the rest of the GA.

"We are slowly losing ground against the Drule." Graham said bluntly. It was his normal method of speaking, and he saw no need to beat round the bush with a

cadet, even one like Kogane. "We can't handle the robeasts that is the long and the short of it. If we can intercept them short of their target, or move said target, such as when they are launched against a fleet, we can destroy them with long range fire. But if we can't, we get what happened to the hub at Vegrillia."

He inputted further commands, and several images taken from long range scanners or unmanned camera drones appeared, showing robeasts being destroyed in such a fashion. Then an entire battle played in quick time, two large fleets moving around one another, one, the GDF clearly winning for a time. Then something happened as they passed near the ring of a gas giant.

At that point half the GDF fleet began to collapse its ships acting erratically or simply fleeing as a symbol for a robeast appeared, having been launched from somewhere within the rings. The Drule pounced, smashing a wedge into that segment of the fleet, completing its destruction before turning on the formations still maintaining cohesion. The Drule had suffered major losses, but still outnumbered the remaining GDF forces, which fell back rapidly. The robeast had also died, but the damage had been done.

The image cut off and Graham placed both his hands on his desk, staring at Keith. "So a way to combat them has to be found. We can match anything else the Drule throw at us, even with the random 'magic' they sometimes come up with but the robeasts are another thing entirely."

Keith understood where this was going immediately. If robeasts were real after all then maybe certain legends could be too. "Your sending me to Arus then? Has anything been heard from them since they fell, what, eight years ago now?"

"No, nothing. But we're getting ahead of ourselves." Graham pushed some more buttons and a new image popped up, showing the Denubian sector in detail. "You and the team you put together will be among several dozen sent into the Denubian sector to look into what's been going on there. One of the Drule principalities, under a king called..."

Graham looked down at his computer, then up at Keith. "Called Zarkon has been making several inroads there. From the last report we had from that sector, three out of the 15 planets that were part of the loose Free Solar Republic are gone. So your mission and the mission of the other teams we send out will be to figure out what's going on there. That is however only a cover for what the real mission of your team will be."

As Graham spoke the image changed once more to a picture of a giant robot. It was not uniformly colored with a black body, one red arm, one blue arm, one Green

leg and one yellow leg. It was also wielding a sword of all things, but it was also carving through what Keith recognized as a Drule heavy battleship flotilla. "This is Voltron, the original linchpin of the Denubian sector's independence."

"Yes sir I've heard rumors about it," Keith said with a nod. "I thought that the Drule had destroyed it, overwhelming numbers I'd assumed."

"No one knows how they did it, but given what we've discovered in the past few months they weren't entirely successful." Graham inputted some more commands and the image of a giant robotic red lion replaced the first picture. "This was found on a planet near the Alliance's border with the Denubian sector, one that is going through a time of severe tectonic chaos. It was found floating in a lava flow, and the head was still cool enough for a man to walk on. Eventually we figured out a way to move it, but the possibilities of other lions like this, and what they could represent, are enticing."

The image abruptly clicked off, leaving Graham staring levelly at Keith. "Your real mission then will be to slowly make your way to Arus. Find out what actually happened to Voltron to break it into its component pieces if that is what happened as well as what happened to its original paladins. They were important people in their own right in the Denubian sector I understand, and we know that one of them was the king of Arus. If you find a lion there, your mission will change to one of theft."

"What?" Keith said, startled into actually interrupting the man. "Sir, we were allied with Arus, doing that kind of thing against an ally.."

"That's right, we were allied with them. But we have to be realistic about these things. Arus is gone Captain. It was bombarded during Zarkon's original push into the Denubian sector into wreckage, and it never had that large a population in any event. I doubt there are more than 10,000 people alive on the entire planet, not after that and after the slavers came through. The lions and Voltron could do a lot more good for the Galactic Alliance than they could ever do for that small number of survivors."

"And if the surviving Arusians object?" Keith asked sharply.

"Then you are to do what you have to secure Voltron for the Galaxy Garrison Admiral" Graham said equally sharply, glaring at the younger man. "We are talking about slowly losing this war without that weapon commander, it is that simple!"

Keith glared at the man, forgetting their disparate ranks for a moment. "I would like to have that ordering writing sir," he said crisply. "If I am being asked to commit murder or sabotage against a neutral or previously allied party, I would prefer to know that my actions will not be disavowed later on."

Admiral Graham snarled, rising to his feet like a mastodon about to charge. "I

will...overlook this moment of insubordination, as it is the first one you have ever committed and this is an unusual circumstance. But keep your high moralistic standing to yourself. Have I made myself clear?"

He waited, holding Kieth's eyes until the younger man nodded slightly, and then went on. "You will have a digitized copy of the latest reports on the Denubian sector waiting in your inbox, along with your cover story. Read it then destroy it, that is an order."

Again Keith nodded, and Graham pointed at the door. "Good, now get the fuck out of here. And don't you dare tell anyone about what I said! That part of your mission is to remain a secret as long as possible, even from your own team."

Again Keith nodded, but rather than leaving immediately he asked crisply. "Sir, am I going to be putting my own team together or will one be assigned to me?"

Graham mellowed at this return to formality and nodded. "Yes, you can requisition anyone currently among the cadets here at Galaxy Garrison or among other personnel, so long as they can get here by the time of your graduation ceremony next week. We want you and your team, along with the others, moving as soon as possible."

Keith nodded, saluted, then turned crisply and marched out of the room, not even slamming the door. But if Admiral Graham thought that that was a sign of his acquiescence to his mission he could not be more wrong. Instead, Keith simply knew shouting at the Admiral as he was wishful to would probably have cost him his commission if not his place in the GDF entirely.

He returned quickly to his room, which he shared with his roommate Sven Holgremsson. The two young men had met several years before they had entered Galaxy Garrison, and both being veritable orphans had connected instantly. This had led them to request to be assigned the same room. They had been given one but when Keith centered, the room did not look like he had left it that morning.

In fact it was he in a shambles, Sven's gun collection lying littered on the floor, along with numerous books, half of which were textbooks the other half from Keith's own collection of history books. The wall had several punch marks on it, and Sven's bed had been entirely upturned. In the center of this mess Sven sat in the lotus position, breathing in and out, large headphones on his ears as he dealt with the fury which had caused this.

Someone else seems to have had a bad day Keith thought to himself looking around with a chuckle, his own anger slightly dimming at that. There was no other explanation for the mess. Even if Sven had been told he'd been held back a year or his latest girlfriend was dumping him it would not have gotten this reaction. After all, Sven

was a bit OCD about his gun collection, just like Keith was about his books.

Of course, Keith reminded himself, *being OCD and in the military sort of goes hand-in-hand*. The joke was if you were not OCD coming in to GG, they would make you OCD or drum you out of the academy. Although in this case they hadn't had to work very hard on these two young men.

Moving over to his half of the room, Keith pulled out his own set of heavy headphones, resting them on his head and leaning back as he said aloud, "Choose fighting playlist." The old, old song Believer from *Imagine Dragons* popped up, followed by several others from the same era. Slowly Keith lost himself in the music for a time letting his anger slowly beginning to a simmer rather than the boiling hot magma it had been.

He was still there when Sven came out of his own angry meditation, looking around the room with a displeased expression on his face. He spotted Keith on the bed and smacked his leg lightly, getting his attention. Sven then moved towards the guns, putting each one away, lovingly looking them over for marks or imperfections before setting them in their cases. "So, did you get the happy news too?"

"Yes." Keith said, pulling off his headphones and looking at his friend. "Have you been assigned a crew yet?" Keith asked.

Sven shook his head and Keith went on quickly, pulling out one of the small datapads that all of the cadets were given upon entry into GG. "Good, then in that case I'm going to request you for mine write the fuck now."

He fired that request off then nodded towards Sven. "I want the best we can get on this team and I was given a.... special mission, so hopefully I won't be shafted too badly on any specific requests I make."

"This is such bullshit!" Sven growled his heavy Norwegian accent apparent. New Iceland had been colonized almost entirely by Norwegians, and the man's accent showed his heritage. "Pulled from Space Exploration and sent to the front I could understand. But sending nearly the entire graduating class into the Denubian sector in small Scout teams, that smells."

"It does, and we'll be talking about just why it's happening at some point when we can," Keith said grimly. "For now though I can't tell you." He waved a finger towards the ceiling, and Sven nodded understanding that meant Keith was worried about being overheard.

"It still sucks moose balls," Sven said aloud, unwilling to stop complaining just yet. "If they are pulling us off Space Exploration, then the least they could do is send us to the front line, not into a backwater that no one cares about one way or another."

"It's not a backwater. It's like the Ottoman front in World War I: it's important, because of the resources it controls and if we can't hold that sector, if we can't know for certain that they can stay neutral and won't let Drule fleets through unopposed, we'll have to shift people from our western front to face them."

"You and your ancient history references," Sven replied, rolling his eyes with a smile. "It's an obsession man, and not a good one." Sven then pointed at the headphones Keith had taken off. "And that classic crap you listen to too."

"What about you and your guns, or your love of explosives?" Keith asked with a laugh. "Tell me, do you get your jollies off better after a good explosion or with your latest girl?"

Sven fired back quickly. "Do you ever get off period?"

The two men looked at one another then laughed, the last of their anger dissipating for the moment before Sven sobered. "Joking aside, Lydia called again."

Keith groaned, looking away and Sven chuckled somewhat grimly. Keith was not a party animal, not at all. He was more at home with a book or learning a martial arts kata than being around women. Not that they didn't see the appeal in him, he just never acted to garner further interest. The one time he had, Keith had made the mistake of assuming the two of them had been interested in the same thing: a short term fun time rather than anything long-term. Lydia had turned out unfortunately to have other ideas, and when Keith had begun to distance himself from her, not maliciously, simply because their finals were ramping up, she had not taken it well.

"I'll call her back," Keith said slowly. "At this point she's kind of stalking me, if it gets worse I'll have to get the professors involved in stopping it. She has no right to call our dorm room like that, not with finals coming up."

"As if the tests matter to you! You could flunk them all and still be top of our class." Sven chuckled.

"Not by a safe margin with you nipping at my heels," Keith replied mildly, and Sven smiled at the compliment though both knew it wasn't quite true.

Keith was head and shoulders above the rest of their graduating class by a significant margin when it came to the tactics and strategy courses. Most people thought he was some kind of wonder-child at it, but Sven knew how long and how hard Keith worked to get that good, the hours upon hours of going over past wars, strategies, tactics, logistics, everything he could get his hands on. He did that every evening, sacrificing his free time in a way no other cadet was willing to do. *Just like his martial arts skills, it's a sign of obsession.*

Then again, I'm not any different. Where Keith shone in tactics and strategy,

Sven was an expert in demolitions, guns and scouting, the best the professors had seen for decades. And while he still had a social life, he still put in far more hours on those classes than most. "Are you certain you'll be able to get me assigned to your team?"

"Yes. We're going to be the real diamond in the rough in terms of the teams sent out to the Denubian sector, so yes. And I want Hunk on our team too. But I want to talk to him first rather than go through formal channels. I won't shanghai him if I can help it."

"That would not be a very good thing," Sven said with a chuckle. "He's got the motor pool duty again, so let's go talk to the big guy now."

With a nod Keith stood up quickly, following his friend out the door. The two of them moved through the halls silently, ignoring the comments and whispers especially of the 'OH my God they're so dreamy' or 'they ain't so hot' variety that they garnered from those around them. While Sven wasn't anything like the recluse that Keith was, there was a lot of resentment towards him just like in Keith's case for how good he was in his specialties.

No one seemed to understand how hard the two of them worked to be that good, especially in keeping their other grades up. Sven had major trouble with languages, whereas Keith had issues with flying. Indeed, he was almost drummed out of the starfighter program because he had a problem with enclosed spaces which impacted him during simulation exercises. His mental discipline however was able to keep it under wraps, and when it came to live fire exercises, he was better than the nearest competition by a very slight margin.

A few hours spent traversing the massive academy's transit ways deposited the two of them at the officer's motor pool. After flashing their IDs they moved towards the sector assigned to maintenance and repair. As they entered the area Keith shouted "Hey Hunk, you busy?"

"Just a second," replied a deep baritone voice coming from within the opened innards of a Galaxy Garrison limo. "These engines are such crap! Why the hell did they upgrade to mark twelve, the mark elevens were real workhorses, not like these fiddly pieces of shit," The voice grouched.

Keith and Sven exchanged a glance but chuckled and simply waited in silence for their friend to finish. And he was a friend, not as close to either one of them as they were to one another, but Hunk was possibly the poster child for the idea of a giant with a heart of gold. You couldn't help but like the guy if you could look past his rather intimidating appearance.

That intimidating appearance was put on display as he pushed himself out of

the limo's interior. "That should do it." Turning he straightened up, and both Keith and Sven, who were not short people at six foot two and six foot four respectively, craned their heads up and then further up. Hunk came from a planet whose colonists had been genetically modified several generations back to be able to live on their heavy grav world, and he stood at around eight feet tall and was broader than both men in front of him combined.

His face broke out into a wide smile however, and he reached out, grabbing Keith's outstretched hand with his own large paw. "Keith! I figured I'd have to go hunting in the training area or in the library for you at this time of year. What brings you down to grease monkey territory?"

"And you," he said, looking over at Sven, sniffing the air theatrically. "You don't smell like plex-cor!" Plex-cor was a popular explosive compound, one with a distinctive smell that lingered long after you finished working with it.

Both men rolled their eyes, but grinned at their friend. It had been a few weeks since they had any free time to spend with him after all. Hunk didn't actually need to take the finals since he had taken them a year ago, but he was still on campus because his first assignment had ended abruptly, dumping him back on GG for a time before he could be reassigned.

Keith quickly explained what was going on as well he could out in the open, and asked bluntly "So, can I ask you to join us?"

To his credit Hunk didn't answer right away, scratching at his chin for a moment then reaching up to pull at the bandanna he wore in his hair for a moment before nodding. "Sure. I've got nothing better to do, and it sounds much more interesting than joining any old engineering division again. On a mission like this, flexibility, speed and the ability to make do with little resources will be key, so I'm your man," Hunk said happily.

"And thanks for even thinking about me. I kind of... kind of went stir crazy working on the *Roberto Castillian*, too damn many rules, too many regs and officers that couldn't find a spanner if you labelled it!" he finished tartly.

"Who else would I want as my grease monkey big guy?" Keith asked, clapping the taller man on the arm. "That just leaves a programming and ECM expert, and a pilot. I mean we could all pilot but we'd probably be best served getting a dedicated pilot to join us."

"Actually I have a suggestion for an ECM and all around computer guy," Hunk said, leaning back against the limo he been working on not noticing as it trembled violently under his weight. "There's a freshman named Pidge I've become friends with

and he's a genius to put it frankly. I mean big time. He's blown through computer programming lessons for every year here in one and frankly he's good enough in that area and in ECM that he could graduate now on just those merits. He also knows like 17 different languages can you believe that? He's also pretty good at mechanics like me. Between the two of us we could probably keep any ship we're assigned going on duct tape and gum."

"How old is he?" Keith asked cautiously.

"Pidge just turned 15. I know it's a little young, but," Hunk looked around for a second before lowering his voice. "But Pidge isn't just bright. He's really mature in a lot of ways, and in others he's about as introverted as you are Keith, but he's got no Sven or anyone else on campus that he really hangs out with except me. I mean I've been trying to do my best to get him accepted among the rest of the freshman at the very least but it's slow going."

Keith looked off into the distance then slowly nodded. "I won't say yes or no to Pidge joining us, I want to meet him first and evaluate his physical abilities. This is going to be a tough, hard mission with a lot of field work I have no doubt. I don't care how good he is at ECM or tech. If he can't keep up physically he can't be on the team."

"You'll be surprised. His family's all gymnasts. They're part of a circus, and he was training with them since a very young age before his eyesight started to go bad. He's not quite in as good a shape as you are, you exercise nut! But he's in better shape than I am." Hunk slapped his large belly with amusement.

Keith rolled his eyes but didn't rise to the bait. Hunk might be a little overweight for someone his size, but Keith knew who was the stronger of them. Hunk could bench press the limo behind him with little difficulty and if someone was that strong, they didn't really need to be in perfect shape. Keith had however gone out of his way since befriending Hunk to teach him several different martial arts styles to go with that size.

"I'll put him through his paces," he said instead. "Set up a meeting for us tomorrow, early. We still have tests we need to study for. But if Pidge is good enough, that will just leave us as with the pilot position to fill."

"No it won't," Sven said, a wicked smirk on his lips. "I already know who I want as our pilot."

Keith looked at him then groaned as he saw the prankster light in his friend's eyes. "No. No, you cannot be serious!"

"Lance might be a disciplinary issue for the professors, but he is the best pilot that's ever been seen here," Sven said firmly, sticking up for his other friend. "You know

it and I know it. Who else could we get that would come even close to his ability?"

"No one and that's part of the problem," Keith said simply. "He knows he's that good and he doesn't like the fact that I beat him in live-fire exercises. You know he calls me his rival."

"I know, and I think we can diffuse that," Sven said calmly. "But if we need the best on this mission, he is the best."

Keith groaned, but it wasn't so much an argument as a sound made by someone who knew that they couldn't argue the point. "Fine, let's get this over with."

Sven chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder and leading Keith out the door while Hunk moved to pick up his communicator.

Several hours later the two men had left that segment of the academy and moved into the barracks buildings set aside for those students following a pure starfighter line rather than their own mixed specialties. They got some weird looks as they passed through the hallways, but Sven led them on anyway, stopping at a door marked with the placard noting the names Russ, Cromwell, and Alvers.

There was also a large stocking the sort children still hung up on Christmas day stuck over the doorknob. Keith looked at it and snorted. "Someone's overcompensating a bit there."

Chuckling Sven pulled out his datapad and made an identity query. Every GG cadet was given a bracelet with their ID information and a small tracker embedded in it so they could be found immediately in an emergency, or if they simply weren't where they were supposed to be. After a moment he nodded. "He's in there, but I think this situation calls for some discretion."

Cocking an eyebrow at his friend Keith shrugged and stepped back. Grinning evilly, Sven kicked the door lightly then shouted at the top of his lungs, "Cadet Alvers! Front and center!"

"Discretion, right..." Keith drawled, turning back to stare at the door. The two of them heard two people scrambling for their clothes and a second later a female cadet with bright blue hair scrambled out, zipping up her flight suit. Seeing two seniors wearing the uniform for the officer's training program she hastily saluted then ran like the hounds of hell were after her.

Behind her Lance McClain paused as he moved to grab up his own flight suit then fell back onto the bed glaring at the other two men. Slightly shorter than Sven, Lance was thinner than either of the other two young men, with a wiry sort of sprinter's body rather than a martial artist. He had sandy brown colored hair, and a certain rakish look to him that had allowed Lance to cut a wide swath through the

ranks of the female cadets over the last five years.

"You two had better have a good goddamn reason for cock blocking me," Lance said mildly, "Or else I am going to ram a bloody shuttle into your dorm room the moment I can."

"Cute," Keith grunted, entering the room and looking around before grimacing and leaning up against the wall rather than sit on either of the other two beds. "And we do have something serious to talk to you about. Call it a job opportunity."

Lance scowled, staring at his rival. "Why the fuck would you need me huh? You smoked me on the last live fire exercise. Why would the amazing Keith Kogane want with a mere mortal?"

Sven made to speak but Keith held up a hand and he paused letting Keith answer. "That's right I did, in the live fire exercises. Lance, you have utterly fantastic 360 degree situational awareness and an instinct for your opponent's enemies' movement I've never seen anyone else match. But you lack a killer's instinct. You hesitate sometimes, and that lets me do better than you in live fire exercises: you can't get past the idea you might accidentally kill someone in them."

The half-Japanese youth paused then shrugged. "And how much of your free time do you spend training?"

"None, that's why it's called free-time, I don't have to spend it on classwork," Lance replied dryly, though Sven could tell his attitude had mellowed somewhat.

"I spend at least three extra hours a day training either my body or my piloting skills. And you're better than me without putting in that time," Keith said. "I might be at the top of our class, but think about how much time and effort it's taken me, and compare that to you and what you've done in your spare time."

"...There is that yeah," Lance said, smirking and leaning back, his arms crossed over his chest. "So, you said you had something to say about a job?"

Meeting Pidge the next day went much smoother than the conversation with Lance, who at first refused point blank, but Sven and Keith eventually talked him round. Pidge in contrast was a pleasant surprise. Keith had envisioned a tiny beanpole of a boy, and while Pidge was short, he was extremely fit, and had the densely muscles and general build of a top notch gymnast. He was also eager to join, wanting to see the Denubian Sector and the planet Pollux in particular. His family had originally come from there having descended from slow boat colonists, before migrating back to the Galactic Alliance.

As Sven had predicted, they both passed their finals with flying colors, and after with his team complete, Keith began to look at the logistics of both their official

mission and their clandestine one. The ship they were assigned to was a Solitaire class gun boat, a decent, small and fast ship, whose main claim to fame was that it could run for years without refueling if you replaced the small cargo hold with extra fuel capacitors, and had a very good shield for its weight class. Though its offensive weapons, in Sven's succinct opinion sucked.

Once they were assigned a ship, Keith sicced Hunk and Pidge on it to see what they could do with it, while Lance got used to the controls. Eventually, about three weeks after the graduation ceremony, the team rocketed off for the Denubian sector.

They had not been in hyperspace for more than a few minutes when Sven turned to the rest of his crew. "Alright everybody, there are some things you need to know about our mission. I wish I could say otherwise, but we're not just going into the Denubian sector to look around. The higher ups think you don't need to know this, but I think that you need to so here we go. You've all seen the news, so I don't need to tell you that about six months ago the cold war between the GA and the Drule went hot. And you might know about the robeasts. What that has to do with our mission is..."

Chapter 1: Forged in Fire...

Allura looked up from talking to a few young men and women as a sharp snarling roar filled the underground caverns. She held up a hand to halt the discussion for a moment, turning in the direction of the sound, her eyes narrowed. "Again!?"

"You would think they'd learn highness," said Maria, an older brunette from one side of the teenage princess shaking her head. She had been a kitchen helper in the castle, but had since become one of the head chefs of the underground community.

"I would have hoped so yes," Allura replied dryly. She thought about going to see what had happened but decided against it, instead simply going back to her current conversation. She was trying to organize a trade meeting with a large farming community within two days on horseback. The trade would bring in much needed food for their community in return for some of their tools and stockpiles of clothing. The trip was taking far more time to organize than she liked for numerous reasons.

When he had technology we could have made the same trip in under an hour and Coran or I would have simply been able to command the two communities to get along. Now it takes two days, through territory blasted and broken from orbital bombardment, and Coran's attempt to order them to give us what we wanted free, diplomatically of course, did not go very well. I wonder what the farming community is

like...

Later that day, Allura took her daily ration of hard bread and moved towards the sector of the cavern leading down to Blue's underground grotto. She was stopped by Coran, who saw her coming. Behind him, a young man around Allura's age was being led along by two others, his eyes twitching noticeably in the lights strung up in the cavern, his face slack. "Your highness, where are you going?"

"Hello Coran, how are you today? I finished setting up that meeting with the farming community, what have you been up to?" Allura asked tartly, though she still smiled at the older man.

Her old guardian's face tightened noticeably for a moment, looking back over his shoulder before turning back to Allura. "You know perfectly well what we've been doing your highness, trying to find a compatible paladin for the Blue Lion. I would ask you not to make fun of our current circumstances."

"Blue already has a paladin, me!" Allura shot back, her smile disappearing as if it had never existed. "You know Blue responds to me, why can't you just let it go Coran?"

"Your highness it's impossible!" Coran said shaking his head. "For one thing, you're a woman, there has never been a female paladin in all the history of Arus. Further even if you were, we could never ask you to fight in the lion. You are too important a figure for us to endanger so, the last royal and a princess as well."

"Important how, princess of what!? We are in a survival situation Coran, as you have pointed out numerous times over the years. Just because I am getting older, closer to 'marriageable age'" she spat that word out like an epithet, which in her mind it was. "Does not change facts. No, I am just Allura now. Our kingdom doesn't exist any longer."

"We must hold out hope princess that aid will come and though I hate to say it, your hand in marriage could be a major bargaining tool in the future," Coran said sadly before his face firmed. "And that is really beside the point. By Arusian law, no woman can be allowed to serve in the military, and no lion has ever bonded with a woman. I understand that Blue is... fond of you, but that is not the same thing as having bonded with him, it is simply a sign of your being from the royal house, nothing more. I'm sorry your highness, but it is impossible."

Allura glared at him angrily, then shook her head slowly and deliberately. "Coran I think we both need to take a break from this for today, less we both say things we would later regret. Can we step back from this and talk about something else?" She waited until Coran nodded in turn, and moved on. "There have been a few reports

from our scavengers that have me a bit worried. They have been running into other groups but these groups don't seem to have any desire to join us, or are a part of any other actual community..."

That discussion went on for some time, and Coran eventually agreed that they needed to start arming their scrounger teams against these nomadic groups they had started to run into. The problem there was that Arus had never really been an armed society, their small space fleet was built around backing up Voltron and the lions. Besides that, they never had a land-based military. Even their police forces were small and unarmed for the most part. So even here in an underground fortification prepared to be a fallback point they had few weapons. For many the best they could come up with were makeshift spears, bows and arrows, and such.

The next day however the same argument occurred again when Coran stopped Allura from once more heading down to see Blue. The argument they had once she was brought back to the small room they shared with a few of the remaining palace staff was just shy of a shouting row, and ended with Coran basically ordering his charge to stay away from the Blue Lion.

"I see, so being a princess matters not at all does it?" Allura said, her usually warm blue eyes so cold they sent shivers up Coran's spine. "After all, as a princess I should have some say in my own life, and should obviously not be ordered around like a menial by an advisor, no matter how senior."

"Your highness, the laws are clear. I..."

"Thank you Coran you have made your position clear. I fully understand if I had the decency to be born a man we would not be having these arguments." Coran winced, but Allura went on unhurriedly, her words like knives. "I also understand that you are clinging to a system that is no longer viable. I hope that eventually you realize that."

She stood up abruptly, moving towards the door, only to pause. "I used to think of you as a second father Coran, but the more you put your ideals of what a princess needs to be over the reality of what I have grown to be like the harder it is to remember why..."

She left Coran behind with that thought, heading out to meet with Kathy and a young man named Lucas. He was the leader of the group heading out to the farming community, and indeed had been the one to find it. "I need to get out of the caverns for a bit Lucas. I realize this is a bit last minute, but you're going to have an extra on your detail today."

The young man winced, but nodded his head in acquiescence. "As you wish

your highness." He smirked, his teeth gleaming in his prematurely lined face. "My wife would probably like you not to have another shouting row with Coran in any event. The baby's a bit colicky at the moment."

Allura laughed. Lucas had married one of the other survivors a few years ago, and they were the only couple to dare to have a child among their community. The baby was a darling, but the trials of looking after it under the current circumstances were immense.

A few minutes later, Allura and the seven men and three women assigned to this mission left the caves with the four carts, two to a cart with the rest on horseback. The horses had once been part of a prized herd that had been the bride price paid to Allura's father when he married her father, though of course they had never been intended for such plebian use.

Allura rode out in the center of the column, her head covered by a cloak, and did not look back unwilling to have another confrontation with Coran today. She heard him then, shouting her name angrily, though she didn't respond to it, instead spurring her horse on.

"Someone's in trouble~~," trilled Gerard, another young man, who had been a park ranger before the invasion. He winked at Allura who couldn't hold back a laugh.

"I have heard that teenagers are supposed to rebel, I think this could count as my bit of rebellion. It was either that, or have another argument with him, and frankly I don't feel like smashing my head against that particular wall once more." Allura replied, still chuckling, but her words were tart. She had been telling the truth when she told Coran that the more he argued with her about her status as the Blue Lion Paladin the less she actually liked the man who had helped to raise her in the years since the invasion.

The party remained on the move the entire day at a decent pace, switching out the horse pulling the carts every hour until sunset. Once the sun started to go down, they searched for a place to camp, with Lucas and two of the others patrolling around the small camp. It was a fun, almost idyllic time for the young men and women assigned to the patrol as Allura got to know the men and women of her community.

However later that night Allura's sleep was interrupted by a cry and several voices raised in a roar. "Get them!" as her eyes slowly fluttered open, she heard another voice bellow out, "But don't hurt the women too much, I've got plans for them!"

With that voice and its horrible connotations ringing in her ears Allura sat up abruptly in her makeshift sleeping bag pulling out her blaster, one of only four the

underground community had. Looking around for a target she saw one man dressed in mismatched clothing about to stab down at one of the others, a man whose features she couldn't make out in the darkness barely lit by the small fire at the center of the camp.

Pulling the trigger she sent the man flying backwards in a welter of blood and seared flesh where his face had previously been. Allura paused at the sight, shuddering, but the screams and roars from all around her broke Allura out of the monetary paralysis caused by having taken a man's life for the first time. Moving to one knee for a more stable firing position she gripped the pistol in both hands and began to fire at any raider she saw.

Four more men fell before Allura felt an impact to her side. One of the raiders had rushed her from just to one side of her line of sight, bearing Allura to the Earth. Allura gasped, but dropped her pistol and grabbed the man's wrist, halting the downward plunge of his knife. The man had only a brief moment to realize his hand had squished down onto a woman's chest before Allura's free hand grabbed him by the throat and hurled him away. As a member of the royal house, Allura was quite a bit stronger than most Arusians, no one alive knew why. But none could argue that it was the case especially after seeing Allura, not a tall woman, hurl a large man aside one-handed.

She leaped to her feet in time to watch Luca stab his spear into another raider, while Kathy slowly moved over to Allura, her own pistol in her hand, though her eyes unlike her princess' were wide and wild, terrified rather than angry. Turning in her direction Allura saw a raider behind her friend raising a large club intending to club Kathy down. "NO!" Allura shouted, and moved by an instinct she had never felt before she thrust one hand forward towards the man.

It should have been a gesture of futility. Instead, a bolt of yellow and orange energy shot out of her palm to impact the man with enough force to hurl him backwards like he was struck by the fist of a giant.

Wasting no time in wondering what had just occurred, Allura shouted. "Rally to me! Rally to me!" racing over to her friend putting her back against the other woman's.

The fight didn't last long after that, the few remaining raiders melting back into the darkness, though by the sounds emanating from the dark, Gerard or one of the other guards they had bypassed to attack the camp wasn't willing to just let them go.

Now that the action was over Allura felt the rush of adrenaline that had filled

her slowly start to fade, and Kathy suddenly had her hands full keeping the princess on her feet, the younger woman's knees almost sagging under her. "There, there highness, you, you did magnificently!"

"Kathy, I think, I think after all we've been through you can call me Allura can't you?" Allura asked.

"Whatever the lady wishes," Kathy said, a hint of a smirk in her voice even as she used helping Allura get over her reaction not the fight to aid her in doing the same thing.

Lucas came over to the two women, bowing deeply to Allura. When he rose up, his face was serious for a moment. "We have two injured, and one dead. Stephanie and Sherra are both alright, though Sherra was almost carried off before her brother caught up with the man carrying her off. She's a little shaken up obviously."

"Obviously," the two women across from him echoed.

Lips twitching Lucas glanced over at the man who had tried to club Kathy down, staring at the gutted remains of his chest. The energy blast Allura had sent his way had done a lot more damage than the hand held blasters. "So, a princess and a sorceress in one? That's new."

"New to me too Lucas, believe me. Though I wonder if it will be enough to convince Coran that I can look after myself as the Blue Paladin."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Lucas replied, causing Allura and the others nearby to break out into laughter.

OOOOOO

Keith and his team flew their ship, which Hunk had named the *Intrepid*, into the Denubian Sector stopping first at several of the planets of the so-called Free Solar Republic, systems or single planets allied to defend their independence. Listening in on radio traffic, Pidge was able to tell them all that this was a very tense time in the sector and had been for the past six years, ever since Voltron had been destroyed.

A few planets had decided to bend the knee to the Drule already while, disturbingly, many more had signed non-aggression pacts with the Drule. This nominally kept them free, but not in reality, opening up their systems to Drule ships. In contrast those nearest the Alliance's border had begun to make overtures in that direction, but hadn't received any interest.

"Why haven't they been offered the opportunity to join?" Pidge asked after gathering some reports to that effect, causing the four older boys to glance at one

another.

They played a quick game of rock-paper-scissors which Keith lost, causing him to curse for a moment before he turned his chair around to look at Pidge's console. "Pidge I'm going to first explain why militarily it would be a bad idea, and then why politically. Feel free to swear when we get to the political part, I know I do."

The fact of the matter was, the Galactic Alliance had no need for any new members, and the oligarchies: the series of alliances, corporations, and vast patronage networks that controlled the Republic Senate had no desire to change the status quo. They might decide to if one of their members more powerful members lost a home planet to the Drule, but that was not going to happen for several years even if the Drule continued their expansion.

And militarily, it didn't make sense because expanding the area the GDF needed to protect would stretch them even thinner than they already were at a time when were trying to scramble for practically every combat capable ship. There is a reason we got this old ship.

"Hey!" Hunk said after Keith finished, smacking him on the shoulder. It was a very light tap from the giant, but it would've sent Keith sprawling even so if he wasn't strapped in like any sensible person should be in space. "It might be old, but Pidge and I did us all proud on this ship I think."

Keith turned his commander's chair towards the other man smiling at him. "I never said you did. I'm just saying that the original offensive power of this ship made it less than ideal for a fleet action."

"That's all right then," Hunk replied, mollified.

"And it's really like that?" Pidge asked, pushing up his glasses. I mean, are you sure you're not just being cynical about the whole power structure thing?"

"Geez kid, you're supposed to be an ECM expert, and a hacking genius. How do you not know about all this already?" Lance asked. This garnered a blush from the younger boy and Lance went in for the kill quickly. "Oh ho, is there something you want to share with the class hmmm?"

"Leave him alone Lance, we all went through that stage." Sven came to Pidge's rescue before turning to more important matters. "I think we're done here right, commander?"

Keith rolled his eyes at the 'commander' comment since he had quickly told the others that he wasn't going to order them to use titles when they were onboard ship like this. If they were ever in a diplomatic setting he would expect it and in combat, they better damn well follow orders. But any attempt to keep to the normal,

regimented distance between the ranks was both doomed to failure and would cause tension that the crew didn't need on a mission like this. "Yeah, were done here."

Working the controls for Keith changed the forward view screen changed to show a map of the area, while the others fell silent watching him work and he finally nodded. "The Republic of Na. The Naracul are a warrior race, much like the Dstyle themselves. From the reports I've seen they are also largely subterranean, with the vast majority of their population underground. They would be my best bet of a race that would be willing to act against the Drule aggression into the sector."

"You hope we'll find friendlies there?" Sven asked.

"I hope we find something there, though I doubt it will be friendly to the GA" Keith said coldly before shaking his head. "Sorry, that wasn't directed at you. It's just, if I was the one expanding into this sector I would have moved on all of the planets that could be used as rallying points for any kind of offensive action. Most of the alliances which make up the Free Solar Republic are purely defensive alliances, but a few like the Naracul have a warrior tradition. And in a warrior tradition, most people realize that defense alone isn't a winning proposition. At the very least, they could've gone searching for the Lions if they had any idea that they were still around, but GDG Intelligence hasn't seen any sign of that."

"Good point," Pidge nodded from behind Keith, pushing his glasses up his nose, his eyes shining eagerly. "I'll start to look for any information about them, is that okay?"

Keith thought about it for a moment then nodded slowly. "Do it, but only if you can get into the networks without it being traced back to us, and keep all the information about the lions you find on a separate data chip."

"Why? I mean I understand the first part, that's kind of obvious, but why the separate data chip?"

"In case we have to abandon ship," Sven replied for Keith.

"I don't like that idea, but I suppose we need to at least have some security on this," Lance grouched. "You realize though that if we take the route you describe here, we won't be in the target system for another few weeks?"

"I got nothing better to do," Keith replied, eliciting a laugh from them. "Besides, if I'm remembering correctly the slower we go the better our ECM and cloaking works correct?"

Pidge nodded at that then rattled off a few numbers and equations that described the curve of that correlation before Lance interrupted him. "Alright we get it kid, geez. Let's just go then."

Over the next few weeks their journey continued. They never went in far into

any of the star systems they targeted, since being close to a gravity well was one way to stop a hyperdrive from working. While their ship was decent for its size and would probably surprise anyone who was thinking it was a unmodified version of the ship's class, Keith knew that their best defense was the ability to hyper out instead of fight.

While they continued to gather information during this time, the group also slowly acclimatized to the cramped confines of the escort ship. Lance and Keith kept butting heads occasionally because of Keith's insistence that they exercise and stay in shape as much as they could, but that was the only source of real irritation among the crew. Hunk, with his cooking that was able to make GG rations taste good, and Sven, being a rock of good sense, kept the others on an even keel. The process was also helped along by the hundreds of old movies that Keith had brought along on his personal data chip.

Three jumps before their first real target, the ship exited hyperspace, moving slowly forward into a system with four gas giants and no signs of any space-faring life, hoping to stop and do some maintenance on the guns. Because of this, they powered down the hyperdrive for a time, the radiation of which would've been dangerous to Pidge even if Hunk could take it, allowing the two of them out onto the surface of the ship.

Lance remained on duty in the cockpit while Keith and Sven remained in the airlock suited up and ready to go in case of an emergency. Neither of them had any inclination to maintenance however, so would have been more of hindrance than an aid.

But the emergency that actually occurred wasn't one dealing with the two currently out in space.

About an hour into the operation Lance's voice crackled over the ship's internal communications net, tight and worried. "Commander we've got a problem, a light cruiser just dropped out of hyperspace barely two lightyears away. It was moving towards one of the gas giants, but it's now turning towards us and..." his voice cut off abruptly, then came back with a series of curses. "They're launching fighters?! I didn't know that light cruisers carried fighters!"

Even as he pressed the button to open the airlock Keith replied almost absentmindedly, his mind awhirl. "All Drule ships have fought some fighter complement aboard them, not certain why." While he was saying that, Sven had contacted Pidge and Hunk who were now swiftly bounding their way over the ship towards them, pulling themselves along their lifelines. Keith quickly moved to help Sven real them in, as the ship began to power up its shields and weapons systems.

The ship had an emergency reel system, but the thing was, like a lot of the redundant tech aboard Alliance ships, wonky. It was so powerful it could pull the lifelines out of the EVA suits. Or even break legs if the individual on the other end had their suit's magnetic lock activated when they were being reeled in.

As they worked Keith could see something in the distance occluding the stars, several somethings actually. Seconds later bright lights began to streak towards his ship. Lance immediately evaded, throwing Keith against the wall, and Sven only kept to his feet because he had the presence of mind to activate his boots magna-locks. Keith hastily did the same, one boot on the wall and one on the floor he continued to pull on the at lifeline connecting Pidge and Hunk to the airlock. "Go, go, go!" He shouted at them over the coms, before switching to another line. "Lance shields up weapons free keep them occupied, and as few wild moves as possible."

"Like I need to be told!" Lance muttered, already firing back. But while as pilot he could control the ship alone, the shields and weapons both needed a dedicated operator to get the most out of. "Get those two inside!"

On his next bound forward Hunk activated his boots magna-locks for a second, halting his forward progress as he reached behind him and grabbed Pidge, actually hurling him forward with all the power he could. Seeing this, Sven moved forward quickly grabbing the young boy as he was thrown into the airlock. The two quickly turned, putting more muscle power into the winch and hauling

The shields began to sparkle visibly a few feet away from where from above Hunk's head as hits from the starfighters, the type called Scorpions, began to impact and Lance's voice again roared into Keith's ear. "Keith, we have to go!"

"3 seconds!" Keith barked back, continuing to haul on the rope. "Hunk get ready! 3,2,1!" With that Keith slammed the emergency reel-in system and Hunk whooped as his entire body was pulled forward faster than he could have sprinted even on a log-G planet. Keith and Sven got in his way before the big man could splat against the interior of the airlock, as Pidge slammed the airlock's outer door closed. "We're in!" The younger boy shouted "Go, go!"

Lance needed no second urging, and a moment later the weightlessness they had been working in was replaced by the feel of gravity as the ship went from a standing start to as fast as it could go it within seconds. Despite that, the group quickly made their way forward joining their friend in the cockpit. Each of them slid into their sections, Pidge quickly powering up the ECM before he began to curse. "Those freaking Scorpions are too close! I don't know if I'll be able to throw off their tracking!"

"Worse, they're boxing us in!" Lance said, not turning away from his controls

as he addressed the rest of the crew. "I don't know if I can get us out of the gravity well before we're entirely encircled. Shields are already down to 20%."

"Redirecting energy now," Hunk began, "but I don't know if we'll be able to keep the shields up for long whatever I do."

At the same time the three of them were speaking Sven took over the controls for the ship's weapons. Small they might be, but they were enough to deal with starfighters. A second later three of the attacking starfighters died one after another under pinpoint accurate fire. "Go for that opening for now," Keith ordered, belting himself down and then looking askance at Lance. "And put your damn helmet on! Who in their right mind goes into a space combat without their helmet on!? That's a regulation for a reason!"

Lance grumbled, but reached behind him with one hand and flipped his helmet up and over his head. Even with that distraction Lance was able to dodge a lot of the incoming fire now that they were moving at speed, while also making for the hole in the starfighter's formation that Sven had just blown open for them.

He grinned manically as he gunned the engines forward after a final dodge to one side, racing for that point while Sven continued to fire at any of the other starfighters that looks to be closing the whole. Keith leaned back, taking in the entire battle before he shouted "Lance juke left!"

The light cruiser had just come into play, trying to cut across the faster ship's route. Its forward batteries fired now, filling the space where the ship would have been if Lance hadn't replied to Keith's order.

"Get it to start chasing us," Keith ordered, thinking quickly as he circled one segment of the battle screen in front of him, shooting it across to Sven. "Race for that area that's already been cleared of starfighters Lance but Sven keep an eye on this other sector right across the encirclement from them. Can you pull off an Immelmann Turn in this ship, pilot?"

"You bet your ass I can!" Lance grinned understanding the plan. They would get the light cruiser to move out of formation to try and close that initial hole, then rocket towards another point directly equidistant distance from that one, and blow a new hole there in the enemy formation, taking what shots they had to. With their shields low as they were, running that final last gauntlet would be tough, but it would probably work so long as the light cruiser couldn't catch them in a real stern chase.

"Wait for it..." Keith said, watching the light cruiser continue to fire at them, while Lance dodged wildly as much as he could while still looking as if he was making for the weak point in Drule formation. "Wait for it..." The light cruiser then was in the

correct position and he shouted, "Now!"

Keith and the others were thrust back into their chairs, the internal gravity generators being overcome by the maneuver that Lance was throwing the ship into. The *Intrepid* corkscrewed up and over before rocketing toward the direction it had originally come from as fast as it could go.

While Pidge did as much as he could to throw off the targeting of their enemies, Sven began to fire forward, his teeth gritted against the acceleration, which was still nearly overcoming the ship's internal gravity. Given the hard lock the Scorpions had on their ship Pidge couldn't do much however and the ship rocked under several hard blows from the starfighters, but the light cruiser's weapons fire went wide for a time. An instant later Sven's fire blew yet another hole in the enemies' formation.

"Shields are down, I'm diverting power to hyperspace engines!" Hunk shouted a bare seconds before they hit the edge of the gravity well. "Going hyper in three!"

But then, there was the bright purple and red flare of hyperspace light from directly in front of them, and the light cruiser appeared there, immediately starting to fire on them.

"ShiTTTT!" Lance shouted, pulling the ship or to one side flipping it into a barrel roll to avoid the incoming fire. But he could avoid all of it.

"How the hell did they do that!?" Pidge muttered. "That spot on a hyperspace jump?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Sven cursed pushing himself away from his controls as they began to spark with electrical energy. "Weapons are down," he reported grimly.

Then the ship shuddered, almost coming to a halt. "They've got a tractor lock on us!" Pidge groaned.

Thinking quickly, Keith ordered, "Cut power to the engines," he ordered quickly. "Let's look as if we're dead in space after that last exchange."

Lance did so then whirled in his chair to look at Keith in astonishment. "What are you planning!?"

"We can't get away from that light cruiser's tractor beam, and if they just slow us down the cruiser and its starfighters can pound us to atoms. But if we give them the opportunity, they might try to take us alive. The Drule always want to take slaves. So instead, we're going to ram the damn thing! Take the fight to them. Drule ships don't have Marine complements aboard them, unless they're transport ships. If we can get aboard, we might be able to capture the ship then use its weapons on its own starfighters."

"That's insane!" Lance said promptly, before shaking his head. "But I don't have any a better idea."

Keith nodded, looking over at Sven. His second in command stood up quickly and move towards the weapons locker, pulling out and assigning weapons to everyone, strapping them to the back of their chairs along a large magnetic clamp.

The starfighters began to zoom around them, but no longer firing at them since Lance had cut their engines. As he had predicted the tractor beam began to pull them in towards the small loading bay of the light cruiser. "The Drule's desire to take slaves makes them somewhat predictable." Keith muttered, "Now, the impetus of the tractor will turn us around and... now Lance!"

Having waited with his fingers poised over the controls, Lance thumped them down like a master piano player putting a little more emphasis on the end of his performance. Power came rocketing back up and the engines roared to life, thrusting the ship not away from the tractor beam, but towards the ship it originated from.

The tractor beam's own pull and the individual controlling it on the other hand couldn't compensate. Instead of gently pulling the smaller exploration vessel in to land on the hanger bay the exploration vessel burst through the outer doors of the hangover hangar Bay before they were fully opened, and continued on to slam into the other side crashing into and crumpling both itself and the wall.

Inside the cockpit of the small exploration vessel all was noise, violence and shaking for a moment as many of the systems blew the ship not exactly having been built for this kind of impact. But as the ship settled, the five young men all realized they were still alive.

"Out, out, out!" Keith roared, not letting his people have any time to recover. Disengaging his buckle Keith flipped himself up and over his chair grabbing the large boarding rifle that Sven had assigned him. From there he moved out of the ship's airlock, rolling out and taking up covering fire behind the wreckage for a moment firing at several Drule soldiers, many of whom were already asphyxiating with the hanger bay door's blown open. Keith and his people were fine since all of them wearing helmets, but a lot of the Drule hadn't bothered.

None of the drule had anticipated an attack like this, and most of them had scattered when the exploration vessel burst through the outer doors of hangar bay. Keith gave them no time to recover, cutting them down with glee as Sven, then Pidge moved out of the ship.

Pidge bounded up over the wreckage, using his natural acrobatic ability and Zero-G training to latch on to the ceiling and fire down. This allowed him to completely

ignore the few defensive positions the Drule had been able to erect, killing several. He hesitated after that first burst of fire, shaking slightly from where he hung, but got over it quickly.

Hunk and Lance came out last, and the pilot grinned at his commander. "If this works, I want to at least paint half light cruiser's decal on my helmet." While in ancient times on Earth aces painted decals noting their kills on their jets, pilots in the GA painted them on their helmets.

"If we survive this sure," Keith said with a roar of laughter, gesturing Pidge to take a position by the doors leading into the rest of the ship from the hangar bay as the last two defenders fell to Sven's incredibly accurate fire. When Sven moved to join Pidge however, Keith grabbed his arm gesturing back over his shoulder. "Gather all of the emergency data-chips then rig it to blow. Take Lance with you."

Lance didn't argue, quickly turning back into the ship with Sven while Keith raced towards the door where his other two teammates were ready. "I'm on point. Pidge your closer." Hunk you go in the middle. Be ready to bring heavy fire down on anyone trying to flank us," he said gesturing towards the heavy crew served weapon that Hunk wielded like it was a hunting rifle.

The two of them nodded, and Pidge quickly slammed his hand down on the controls opening the door.

They raced out, not running into any opposition directly on the other side, though they did run into a fixed position a few seconds later as they raced down the corridor. Their friends joined them a bare minute after that firefight ended, with Lance carrying a tiny bag as Sven carried several more weapons, distributing them quickly before taking out a few cameras here and there that he had spotted in the corridors.

With that done, Lance began to distribute the data chips to everyone. Taking his, Pidge grimaced a little as he looked at it. "Do I have to?" He said with a bit of a whine in his voice.

Keith didn't answer, instead reaching down into his pants feeling for where a bit of false skin had been implanted

. Peeling it away very slightly, he grimaced in pain as he slid the data chip in. A small emergency healing patch went over that, and he pulled his hand out shaking his head. "Damn boss that looked weird!" Lance said laughing.

"You're next Lieutenant!" Keith said before shaking his head and pointing forward. "Let's get moving!" Behind them their ship exploded, rocking the ship and more emergency lights flared on all around them.

As Keith had anticipated, the Drule aboard this ship weren't trained in

boarding operations, this light cruiser was designed to fight smaller pirate ships, to be the aggressor, not the defender. Very few of them had any training in hand-to-hand, and there didn't seem to be that many actual infantry weapons aboard ship. The defenders came up with a few tricks, letting loose gas into the corridors, stun beams set here and there into the walls, but the team continued to make steady progress.

They were about halfway through the ship by Keith's estimate when it shook again. "What just happened?" he muttered, looking around. "A secondary explosion?"

"I'm going to ignore that," Sven said actually lifting up his chin loftily and looking away while his fingers were busy reloading his guns. "No explosion of mine would have a secondary component unless I wished it to."

Nearby, Pidge dropped his weapon and pulled out a small personalized datapad jacking it into a control panel set into the wall of the hall. How he used that small control panel to hack into the rest of the systems aboard the ship Keith didn't know, but he was happy Pidge could, because it had helped them a time or two to prepare for ambushes before they ran into them.

Now Pidge looked up, his face paling inside its helmet. "Boss, we've got incoming from behind! Drule infantry, heavily armed and armored. They look like the robot shock troops they use!"

"Crap that must've been the shudder we just felt, the captain of this ship called in help!" Lance groaned.

"Continue on, or dig in somewhere?" Sven asked calmly, even as he turned to look back the way they had come.

"Move on, but prepare some traps along our route as we go Sven," Keith ordered. "Lance, you're on point with me, we have to move. If we can get to the bridge, we can dig in there."

Even with Pidge occasionally stopping to check in with on the computer systems as to where their opponents were and Sven's surprises, the newcomers were still good enough to not only catch up to the space explorers, but encircle them. The few remaining defenders from the ship helped, pushing forward from the bridge that had been Keith's original target and holding them in place for a few seconds.

Keith knew what they were doing, but when he tried to break out around them, there was nowhere to go. Even using Hunk's weapon to blast down walls they couldn't make any headway. The attempt only let them get trapped, and the robot infantry troops closed in on them.

"Dig in!" Keith ordered with a sigh.. "Time for a last stand gentlemen."

"Why do I have visions of the Alamo in my head right now?" Lance quipped.

"I will forever curse you for getting us all into those old movies," Hunk said shaking his head as he ripped out a portion of the interior bulkhead twisting it around with brute strength to use it as cover.

"It's cultural!" Keith said loftily, then looked at each of them in turn catching their eyes with his. Pidge looked afraid but determined, Sven was his normal iceman in combat self, Lance was grinning manically, all his normal arrogance and humor gone to bare the warrior beneath. And Hunk simply stood there like a stolid giant. "It's been an honor gentlemen, now let's see how many of the bastards we can take with us!"

To their surprise however, the droids paused before attacking the compartment they were holed up in as someone spoke in Drule, their weapons suddenly powering down before powering back up. Hunk recognized the new whine and his eyes widened. "Stun setting! Keith they're trying to..."

That was the last thing Keith heard before the entire room they were in was flooded by strobing blue light, and he knew no more.

OOOOOOO

Allura moved her shoulders around in the chair of the Blue Lion, sighing happily. *Who would have thought these chairs were so comfortable? I feel I could almost sleep here like this.* A faint roar brought Allura out of her moment of almost sinful pleasure. "I know Blue. Pop up the sonar would you? I don't want to smack you into the tunnel again."

The roar this time was louder, and Allura smiled, her hands almost caressing the controls for a moment as the roar turned into a purr. The image popped up ahead of her, and she smiled, angling the Blue Lion down and into the underwater tunnel leading to the grotto Blue rested in since the invasion. As she did so, Allura's nose wrinkled, and she turned slightly to look over her chair. "Ugh, and no offense Blue, but I'm going to see what I can do to fumigate you after this. I know the fish will be welcome, but good grief do they smell!"

Behind the pilots chair in the small clear area around the entrance to the cockpit of the giant lion were several large baskets of fish. They had been given to her by a tiny fishing community she had found while searching for survivors along the shoreline, only to be bitterly disappointed. Every city around the entire planet had been destroyed every town, every village razed, and then the slavers had come in, finding and taking away what survivors they could find.

A few minutes careful maneuvering brought the blue lion popping up out of

the water in the underground grotto, water running off its for as it moved to the shore. Once there it knelt down and Allura patted the controls affectionately, even as her lips quirked into a scowl seeing Coran waiting for her with several other people. "That was fun Blue, even if we didn't find many people. Still, I suppose it's time I face the music."

The lion's response was a low rumble that made most of the people waiting with Coran flinch back. But to Allura's senses it almost sounded as if the great beast was amused, as well as protective.

Pulling out her helmet, Allura jumped from the muscle of blue down onto the ground, then turned ignoring Coran who was stomping his way towards her, rubbing the large robotic lion's nose. The lion actually purred as if it was alive for a few moments under her tender touch. She turned then, still ignoring Coran and nodded at the men following him. "I've got several bags of fish in there, and two fishing communities to mark on the map.

They all nodded and turned away, allowing Coran to approach his princess alone. "May I speak to you for a moment your highness?"

Allura rolled her eyes but followed the older man willingly to through the underground caverns to the small cave they used as their living quarters. The moment the door, such as it was, closed behind them Coran whirled on Allura, his entire body tense. "I told you to stay away from the blue lion, and what do you do, take it out on a joy ride!? The more time you stay with it the less time you're spending learning how to lead our people, and the harder it gets to wean the blue off you! You are not only undermining your position as princess, but our defense with your actions."

"You make the mistake that you assume I wanted Blue to be weaned off me, or vice versa." Allura replied tartly, glaring at her old advisor. She loved the man dearly, he had become a second father to her in many ways but he simply could not move past his old-fashioned beliefs! "I am unwilling to let other men nearly lose their minds an attempt to bond with Blue when it is obvious that he she has done so with me! I am the blue paladin!" she growled, magical energies power rocketing from her eyes and hands as blue roared agreement in her mind. "The sooner you get used to that idea Koran, the better we all will feel. And as for me taking her out on a joy ride, I took her out to search for other survivors, and a found a few. Now, do you want to hear about that, or do you want to continue trying to fight an argument you have long since lost."

Coran glared at her for a moment then sighed theatrically. "Very well your highness, but realize that if we ever get in contact with any other planet, your position as princess will take precedence over this game you are playing with being the Blue Paladin."

Now it was Allura's turn to glare at him before willing her mind back to the here and now. The two of them had been smacking heads far too often of late. Indeed, a split was beginning to develop in the small community they lead. The oldsters and most of the male population continued to look to Koran clinging on to their traditions, and unwilling to listen to a woman. On the other hand, a lot of the women and the younger men looked to Allura, especially after she had led several successful raids against raiders.

Despite that slowly mounting tension thanks to Coran and Allura, their small community was now thriving, as were the two nearest ones allied with them. Yet the totality of the people in each of them was less than 200. The Drule had done too good a job at wiping out her people.

Finishing describing her mission Allura sighed, leaning her head back against the sofa she had once been able to use as a bed when all this began. "Worse, even the fish seem to be dying. It's just like what the farming community said, the crops aren't yielding as much crops as they did, the soil has been getting worse every year. We, we need to figure out what the Drule did to our planet Coran, or else we all might just die out!"

Quenched in Blood...

When next Keith woke, he found himself chained to a wall. The wall in question was part of a high-ceilinged tower of some kind, with bars on the windows he could see, and a heavy metal door, obviously a prison though it looked more like something from the Dark Ages than anything that should be in use today.

His team was spread out along the walls of the tower around him, equally chained. Keith immediately noted that the chains on Hunk were the same as the rest of them, but he didn't say anything just yet about that. A time would come when that would be helpful, but they would probably be only able to try one escape, best to get it right. As Keith looked, the big man began to stir, followed by the others quickly.

"Finally awake are you?" said in a heavily accented voice. "I have to say when I heard first heard the reports about how well you five fought, I didn't believe it. Galactic defense force troops normally fight adequately I suppose, but that well?"

Keith looked at the man in front of them. He was a large fat Drule, a noticeable bulge to his stomach and even a second chain, something that Keith had never seen before in a Drule though of course he hadn't seen many in-person. He had an evil smirk on his face and was tapping a long, heavy rod made of metal with a long, thin end in

his hand. "Still, your bravery was noted, and Lord Commander Mormock has decided to sponsor you in the Pit of Skulls."

"Go fuck yourself!" Lance said crudely. "We're never going tOAHAAH!"

His words cut off into a scream as the Drule turned lazily, bringing the large rod around and touching it to Lance's skin, bared there since his spacesuit had been removed, leaving him in his under t-shirt and pants. A bright spot appeared on Lance's skin as something like electricity only purple in color coursed through him.

"Hey scumbag!" Keith shouted, trying to taking break out of the chains even as he shook his head sharply at Hunk, who was about to do the same thing though in his case he would've actually succeeded. "You're pretty fucking brave with us chained up like this! How brave would you be if even one of us was loose!"

"Yet you're not loose, are you?" The man said snidely, and moved over to Keith. Instead of lightly touching the rod's end to his chest like he had with Lance, he brought the lance down like it was a switch. "You're slaves now! The sooner you all realize that, the happier you will be for the limited time left to you."

Keith roared aloud, his body shaking in agony, but his teeth were bared and he lunged forward actually trying to bite at the man almost like an animal, causing him to step back with a laugh.

"There really is fight in you! Heh, that'll make it all the better when it comes time for you to be sent out into the games which will happen in a few hours' time. Perhaps a more physical beating will force your new places in life to sink into your thick skulls." The fat Drule nodded to himself and moved towards the door. "Two robots will be in shortly to unlatch your chains. Then you will be given weapons and sent out into the sands. If you attempt to fight the robots, you will be sent weaponless against your opponents. I would suggest you not do so." With a laugh he opened the cell door and left

"We're on Planet Doom?" Where the hell is Planet Doom anyway, and is that some kind of odd translation, or did they actually name the planet that?" Lance asked after a moment, his voice coming out in gasps.

"I think its both name and intent," Sven said dryly looking over at Keith, gesturing towards Hunk with a twitch of his head. "Why?" he asked simply.

"Y, you heard the man, they, they're alert for any attempts on our part to escape right now," Keith said, looking around for anything that could be a listening device even as his hands signaled 'wait and watch. Eyes unseen' in the sign language the GA marines used while moving silently through enemy terrain.

Sven nodded mollified for the moment but Hunk looked still furious. Keith had

never seen him like that, and given how strong Hunk was it was kind of scary to think about what he could do if he was really enraged. Still, there was nothing he could do about it right now. Instead Keith closed his eyes and began to mediate, pushing the pain he had just bene through aside.

But before he could try to think up anything to mollified the big man, the two promised robots came in, one of them carrying a large crate setting it down in the center of the room as the other robot moved to each of them, touching their shackles lightly with a controller.

Hunk hit the floor first, then stood up, his hands clenching and unclenching, but he was in control Keith was happy to see. He moved towards the docks, pulling out weapons. He gave a spear to Pidge, then another one to Lance but gave himself, Hunk and Sven swords and shields. "Whatever happens, you two stay behind the three of us for now. Lance, you're still feeling it aren't you?"

"That thing whatever it was is still making my nerves rattle Keith," Lance said weekly. "How the hell are you dealing with it?"

"Mental exercises to push past the pain," Keith replied stretching in place slowly, his eyes closed. "I'll pay for it later though. For now, let's just prepare as best we can for what's coming."

OOOOOO

Planet Doom was not, as many analysts in the Galactic Alliance thought, the center of government for the Drule Empire. Indeed, they very idea of the principalities of the Drule having a single center was laughable considering how fast and how disparate their diaspora had been. Officially Planet Doom was just the center for the Great Games, the gladiatorial combats which went on every day of the year and was the central attraction for their media. They were populated mainly by slaves, nobles from principalities which had been conquered, disowned sons or daughters, and even some true royals who wanted to test their physical prowess.

Unofficially, it was neutral territory. With the backdrop of the blood sports going on, deals and alliances were brokered among the rich and powerful, from the lowest noble to the highest Emperor.

And among those gathered, Lord Zarkon stood head and shoulders above the others, both physically and in his power. His personal power base was also quite large. His principality was one of the largest, and it was still growing with his slow annexation of the Denubian Sector. He also was the only Lord who had access to the robeasts,

those magnificent examples of dark magic and technology mixed into a horrifying reality. Zarkon and his witch Hagar were the only ones who knew how to create them, the process having been born through their alliance rather than from one or the other, and no other lords could do so.

This wasn't because they lacked magic. Five of the other 20 kings or emperors of the Drule people could call upon magic, and two of them were actually magic users in their own right. But they would never be able to create anything that could mix magic and science equally. That was Zarkon's true brilliance. And he had brokered the robeasts, and the fact that the Galactic Alliance could not match them, into further deals favoring his principality.

Turning from making one such deal, Zarkon looked around the open ended hall that was used as the primary meeting place for high nobles only now noticing that one of the rulers who was a magic user herself was here and hadn't approached him. *Though of course given her predilection towards hating men that doesn't exactly surprise me. It is a pity though that she turned down my offer for my son's hand in marriage. The two of us together could have become the most powerful dynasty the Drule have ever seen.*

The woman in question looked up as if she felt his yellow eyed gaze on her, and quirked an eyebrow. Zarkon merely chuckled, holding up his glass of blood wine and tilting it toward her in a mock salute before turning away.

Merla was a tall statuesque woman, with unblemished pale blue skin and high cheekbones, along with wide pointed ears like all Drule. She had dark pink hair, sometimes done up in a tight ponytail, sometimes let to fall loose straight down to her shoulders. She dressed to good effect, putting her body on display without ever revealing anything, enticing without being crude. But her body was not her most dangerous weapon, that was her mind, and as Zarkon turned away, Merla returned her attention to the conversation she was having with the two other women currently in the room. Both of them were older than her, but that of course didn't mean anything in terms of power.

"And you say that it is the use of seeds and the symbolism of them that I was wrong about?" she asked, frowning. While not a powerful kinesthetic sorceress, her powers more relied upon mental domination than anything else, Merla had a small project going on in an attempt to revitalize a dying world in her domains. The world was mineral rich, with platinum and other heavy metals, but it was dangerously close to becoming a dead world thanks to over mining. If magic couldn't work, Merla would have to invest heavily in an attempt to bring it back or replace the infrastructure to

work in closed environments.

"Symbolism and emplacement of the seeds in magically corresponding areas," Hagar replied from under her hood, gesturing with a finger. The small seed that was being held aloft between the women began to rotate under her direction. "For an entire planet, I would recommend at least 375 of them spread out in a perfect equidistant pattern."

"And how much would your aid cost me?" Merla asked.

"This would be a long project." Hagar said thoughtfully. "Even for simple consultation on something this large, my fee would be exorbitant. I would demand at least 10,000 slaves for that. If you want me involved in the entire process and Lord Zarkon agrees, my price would be twenty times that amount at least."

Merla looked over the older woman said standing next to Hagar, who shrugged but nodded. Queen Callisto was older than Marla, approaching middle-aged for their race but still incredibly good looking. She could have had no end of suitors, and indeed rumor said Zarkon himself had approached her at one point.

However she had very... odd tastes. Zarkon was too old for her. In fact if rumors were to believe even his son might be too old for her. She was involved in the current discussion because the planet in question was one that was set up on the border between her and Queen Merla's territories.

Merla frowned at the witch thoughtfully. While she personally found the creation of robeasts reprehensible, she could not say that Hagar's price was two exorbitant for the work she wanted done. "And you would have to be paid in slaves?" she asked instead. "Would not a percentage of the earnings suffice once the project is finished?"

Hagar scowled at that shaking her head. "I have no idea why you think that the lives of slaves are worth anything Merla, but I would have to consult with my Lord Zarkon if you are talking mere monetary payment methods."

"Do so," Merla said shaking her head. "I have no objection to a clean war, a clean death, even one in combat. But sacrificing so many lives to simply create beasts of blood and violence? That, I will not be a part of."

Hagar cackled shaking her head and moving off. She stopped however turning to the open wall of the hallway frowning as something stirred her senses, something like, like destiny coming together or something of that nature. After a moment though it faded and she could no longer feel it. Nonetheless, Hagar moved out of the hallway and onto the long balcony beyond finding Zarkon talking to a one of his noble named Lord Mormock. There was a ringing gong a moment later and much of the conversation

paused, many of the other lords following Hagar, even Merla and Callisto.

Down below the robotic announcer began its work. A large robot with a massive mouth wider than its body set onto a hover car, it glided out into the arena waving its small skinny arms wildly. "Ladies and gentlemen, lords and ladies. This evening's games are going to start out with a treat! We have today five newly captured Galactic Defense Force personnel!"

While this won a round of surprised applause from the main audience below and all around the royal box, more than one Lord scoffed, and one of them even gave voice to it. "Humans, I suppose? They never last long. Individually some of them show promise but they spend too much time protesting their lot, never realizing they have lost any control over their fate."

"These might be different, in fact I'm wagering on it," said Lord Mormock. Zarkon looked at him questioningly and the other man smiled bowing his head deeply to his king. "They put up quite a fight when Cathgas attempted to capture them my Lord. Indeed, they turned around and tried to actually board Cathgas' light cruiser. He was forced to call in aid from a nearby space station, and it was only the robot infantry that turned the tide against them."

Zarkon nodded in interest at that, while the other Drule looked on disdainfully. The same wag from before shouted out, "Perhaps, but they are still just humans! The GDF's power is in its size and industry, not in its individual combatants."

"Will see them as individual combatants later, this first fight is group versus group combat," Mormock said with a shrug. "But even in single combat I bet you'll be surprised by this group. In fact I'm willing to wager on that as well."

Others quickly moved to take Mormock up on that, most of them wagering against the humans. Zarkon however refrained for a moment saying he would see how they looked when they came out onto the sands of the arena before making his bet. Merla followed his example knowing Zarkon had a fine appreciation of fighting men.

OOOOOO

Keith and the others walked out onto the sand, staring around them in shock at the sheer size of the arena. "Holy hell," Hunk said. "It really is like a football field! At least in size anyway."

The arena was made of sand, a desert dotted here and there by rocks, plants, and bones, lots and lots of bones scattered everywhere. Above them was a high wall separating the arena itself from the audience above, set like the Colosseum of Rome in

ever spiraling seats. To one side and directly above the regular audience sat a large box structure, where Keith could make out several hundred seemingly better-dressed Drule.

The humans were being booed as they looked around, but Keith could care less about that, listening to the skill describe the upcoming fight. "It's going to be seven on five," he said quickly, looking over at Pidge who nodded. The two of them were the only ones to could speak and listen to Drule accurately. The others had a smattering, but not much.

"Here's the plan. Hunk you're our anchor, take center point. I'll take left, Sven right. Lance, Pidge, you are on either side of us with Pidge on mine and Lance on Sven. When they charge us, you two fall back slightly as if you're afraid. That should make them bunch up in turn. We'll wait for the right moment to counter charge and break their formation, before finishing them quick.

He locked eyes with the others one after another. "Kill them all once they are down, we can't afford to fight with kid gloves right now. While we're doing that, Pidge, Hunk, look for any piece of bone or something like that you can hide on your person and sharpen later. This is the only time were probably going to be unobserved," Keith said.

Indeed, Keith's voice was almost completely drowned out by the roar of the crowd as the door opposite the one they had entered the arena from opened to reveal their opponents. Four of them were aliens that Keith had never seen before, taller than most humans with broad shoulders and large bat-like ears. When they opened their mouths to shriek a challenge at the humans Keith saw that their teeth were all pointed, marking them out as purely meat eaters. The other three were a mixed bag, coming from conquered races who Keith had seen pictures of before.

None of them were from the Galactic Alliance, which removed some of the moral ambiguity of killing them all from Keith's mind. They also didn't look nearly as eager for the fight as the four in the lead, but they still seemed to harden their resolve and move towards the humans with intent if not eagerness.

"Any questions?" Keith asked looking over at his friends. None of them had any, and Hunk strode forward, his eyes still smoldering in anger from having seen Keith and Lance tortured earlier. He was the only one who had chosen a blunt weapon from the box, a small mace that in his hand looked like a toy but he had a shield like the others. They were of a type you couldn't use to create a real shield wall, but hopefully the idea of someone cowering behind them would make sense to their attackers.

It seemed to, as almost as soon as the announcer stopped talking the group

across from them charged, even the three aliens who didn't look all that into it. "Let them come to us guys, they'll only arrive tired. Wait for it..." Keith said staring coldly, staring at them as they cross the sands.

OOOOOO

"I will put money on the humans," Zarkon said at last a moment before the announcer finished effectively silencing the conversational around him. Lord Mormock looked surprised, but bowed servilely taking the pouch of credit ships and heading over to the two robots who were acting as the bank for the bets.

Merla looked at the older King thoughtfully for a moment then nodded sharply. "I will put money on them as well then." Zarkon looked at her questioningly and she shrugged. "It's a mere pittance, but I will admit that your betting on the humans intrigues me. Is there any reason behind it?"

Zarkon chuckled, gesturing with his wine glass. "They are standing together they're not protesting or shouting at the crowd, and in that one close-up out their faces, they seemed determined rather than scared. The other team might also be working together, but I think they're in for a rude surprise..."

OOOOOO

An essential part in being a successful commander in any kind of battle was all about knowing the flow of battle, getting your timing for various maneuvers right. This was why Keith had excelled since entering Galaxy Garrison: he could feel the movement of the battlefield almost as well as Lance could detect and keep track of danger all around him when he was flying a starfighter.

This time was no different. The attackers were now within two paces of the three holding the front line, Lance and Pidge having retreated, allowing the enemy to shrink their own line in an effort to break the humans feeble looking shield wall. Keith breathed in very briefly then shouted "Now!"

With that the three humans flung themselves forward over the intervening two spaces, taking three steps to cover that space and slamming their shields forward into the front runners of the group. Caught flatfooted and even with a few actual feet in the air this impact sent the frontrunners sprawling into their fellows, none of whom had expected the charge to be turned on them like that. The countercharge was a deadly part of early infantry warfare for a reason after all, especially against barbarians

like this.

Keith stabbed forward, gutting one of the bat-like looking aliens, while Sven did the same across from Hunk, who smashed another to pulp with a blow from his hammer. Pressing forward they hurled the dead bodies into their fellows, further disrupting their footwork. Behind them Lance and Pidge quickly moved around the combat, coming in from the sides. A few seconds later, the last alien died on Lance's spear, the pilot looking a little queasy as he pulled it out of the alien's gut.

Pidge and Hunk both knelt down to down opponents, finishing them off quickly and efficiently, or so it seemed to the audience before moving back at Keith's bark command. They formed into a shield line as best they could once more, facing the opposing doorway as Keith looked around at the stunned audience, who only now began to cheer and shout their approval of the massacre.

"Well," Lance, mused, moving forward to nudge Keith lightly in the back. "At least they'll know that were no pushovers now."

OOOOOOO

"...That was rather fascinating, and showed a level of ruthlessness that I find surprising from humans," Merla said before looking over at Zarkon. "Was that what you expected?"

Zarkon's eyes narrowed as he looked down at the humans. "Somewhat. I expected the result, though not that quickly. I'm going to have to keep an eye on these five. Mormock, you said that Cathgas sold them to you to pay off an old debt?"

"Yes my Lord," Mormock said, bowing obsequiously. "Do you wish to purchase them from me?"

"No, but forward a report of their battle with Cathgas' ship to me. I think it could be interesting reading."

OOOOOOO

Months passed as the five 'intrepid explorers' as Lance called them went about the business of living as best they could as slaves in the Pit of Skulls. They fought in the arena every day, sometimes more than once. They fought alone, they fought in groups, they fought in handicap matches, or matches in uneven terrain.

Keith kept them together during this time, always reminding them that they had to keep their eyes on what he called 'the main chance'. "We are always working

towards escape and helping one another."

A time or two, he or Sven would push their way forward when the guards were randomly picking out people for their one-on-one matches and it looked as if the guards were going to target Hunk, Pidge or Lance. While a good fighter, Lance still often hesitated at times when he had to kill a downed opponent. Indeed they all had had refused at times to do so, only to receive heavy beatings via pain sticks. Eventually Keith put his foot down and told the others they simply couldn't afford to do so any longer: had to look out for themselves.

Lance in turn became the heart of the crew. He was always joking, making fun of the Drule when they their backs were turned, keeping Pidge, Hunk and the others amused at nights with tales of his exploits both fictional and not. He did everything he could to keep them all from falling into the well of despair that far too many of their fellow prisoners/gladiators had fallen into, showing the heart that Sven had seen and not just his incredible piloting skills.

For their part Pidge and Hunk took the lead in creating tools they could use to escape, hiding them in a small enclosed space underneath Hunk's bunk. The team had won some actual beds for themselves after they had survived the first month. The hole was made in the floor by removing a large rock and replacing with a thinner rock of the same dimensions. The tools they had gathered eventually included small knives and a set of lock picks made out of bones, and a makeshift rope made out of cloth taken from the dead bodies of other slaves or their opponents from the arena.

Besides keeping the pressure off the others, Keith and Sven also occasionally snuck out to canvass the area, or try to steal extra food for the crew. They also began to ham it up at times for the crowd, drawing more attention from the guards away from not only their teammates but the rest of the prisoners. To the Drule it seemed as if these two at least had come to actually enjoy their lives here, but that couldn't be farther from the truth.

Eventually the physical beatings stopped after Keith went out of his way to humiliate the overseer they had previously been assigned, killing him in an exhibition match. The new one was not nearly as sadistic but far more intelligent, which made being scavenging bits and pieces of tools to use and eventual escape much harder, and he was more liberal with the pain stick too, which didn't do any lasting harm but was just as painful as a beating.

Oddly enough though, their lives weren't entirely made of violence, death and slowly building hopelessness. There were moments of utter strangeness, the strangest of which occurred after, or rather during Pidge being taken away one evening after

they had been there for around two months. The others tried to protest but were chained to the wall at the time, yet despite their curses the new overseer didn't actually punish them for their insolence. Instead he simply smirked. "Don't worry, you'll get him back whole of body perhaps if not in mind."

"Was that supposed to make us feel better?" Lance quipped, but again the overseer merely chuckled and pushed Pidge out the door.

The next morning Pidge came back looking none worse for wear as the rest of the group crowded around him. Then Lance noticed the somewhat glassy eyed expression of someone utterly exhausted, and what looked like a bite mark on Pidge's neck. "Hey Pidge were you bitten by some kind of animal?" he asked, pulling the youngster's jumpsuit down slightly to get a better look.

Pidge backed away quickly, pulling it back up. 'Er, nothing like that, I just um...."

"Why don't you tell us what happened?" Keith ordered.

Pidge didn't want to do it first, but eventually the others teased the story out of them. He had been taken to the room of a gorgeous middle-aged woman, who had commenced to basically seduce him. Keith blinked, leaning his head against the back wall behind them as one hand came up to rub his face. "What? Just ...what?"

"I, I have no idea what to think about that," Sven said, leaning back against the wall he had been sitting against staring at Pidge for a moment. "Why?!"

Lance however simply collapsed to his knees howling in laughter while Hunk rolled his head eyes heavenward as if seeking patience.

The object of their amazement was now blushing a color a tomato would envy, looking anywhere but at his teammates. "I, er, I had talked to one of the guards after well after this morning I mean..." he said stuttered, pausing for a moment before going on. "Um, apparently Queen Callisto likes, um, well she likes young boys like me. It was weird..." he said finally.

"But a good learning experience I'd bet," Lance said between laughs, slapping his hand on the floor before rolling over onto his back to stare up at Pidge, a mock furious glare coming to his features. "You have no idea what I would've given at your age to be taken under the arms of some hot MILF! Are you complaining?"

Lance had a look in his eyes that spoke a tremendous amount of either teasing or heckling if Pidge answered in the affirmative for that one. Luckily he didn't have to lie. "No, not, I mean, not really it was weird at first, but..."

"Is this going to be a regular thing?" Keith asked seriously. "Is she trying to seduce information out of you?" Keith had been surprised that no one had attempted to question them, or even search them thoroughly yet.

"No," Pidge answered quickly. "I don't, that is, no to both questions I think. I think she just wanted the experience, the um, the one time. Going by what her guard said, she collects virginites basically."

Lance looked over at Keith and was about to say something when Hunk surreptitiously raised a heavy foot as if to stomp down on him. He subsided, but moved away from the bigger man quickly, moving over to lean against the bunk bed to one side.

"And she never asked me any questions about galaxy Garrison. We actually talked for a time during," Pidge's blushed even reder something that Keith would never have thought possible. "During one of the... breaks....we talked. And Callisto's lands aren't anywhere near the Galactic Alliance. So she doesn't really care about them. She's having some troubles on her borders, raiders or something, but nothing major, and she's not even certain where the raiders are coming from or if they're not other Drule."

"Interesting information. Can you pump..." he paused as Lance fell into another round of laughter, Sven and Hunk joining him this time. "Oh grow up you three," Keith ordered angrily though his own mouth twitching gave him the lie. "Are you going to meet her again? And if so can you get more information out of her? A honey trap can work both ways after all."

"No," Pidge answered promptly. "I don't think I'm going to see her again."

"Hey." Lance said excitedly, standing up quickly you think this might be a regular thing for a lot of the women here? 'Cause I've seen some of the girls in that audience, and wowie! The drule might be evil and murderous and all that, but their women can be sexy as hell."

Keith rolled his eyes but as Lance tried to draw the other boys into a discussion on this point said simply "a honey trap is meant to make you either happy or with your lot in life, or ring information out of you. If you we all get seduced, will this cage be any less of a cage?"

That sobered them right up as he had intended and Lance nodded. "I'll keep my eyes on the main chance Keith." He replied, using Keith's phrase for their mission of escape.

Keith nodded with that, and their lives and slaves continued. To their immense amusement (and gratification) Lance and Sven were both ordered out for an evening with some of the local ladies. Sometimes htis was very enjoyable, but to Lance's horror at times the women were not always attractive, and they were still commanded to perform regardless. This led to some horrifying experiences, both when they refused,

and when they were forced to anyway.

Hunk and Pidge did not seem to have garnered any interest in that area and to their surprise Keith didn't either. Hunk was probably intimidating and Pidge too young for most, but Keith not being ordered out was a surprise since even Lance had to admit that the commander was a good-looking turned out that he was deemed a little too intense, a little too dangerous to be really attractive.

Yet he was still pulled from their cell two months after Pidge's experience. But instead of being ordered to work as a veritable stud horse, Keith was taken to see Lord Mormock and two of the Drule's highest nobles.

Unbeknownst to Keith and the team, while the GDF had seemingly wiped their hands of the Denubian Sector they had retaken some of the planets they had previously lost to the Drule. A new brand of long-range railgun had been developed to combat robeasts which could fire at them well out of the range of their terror field, and well beyond the range of most Drule weapons systems. Despite only a few examples being in use so far it had turned the tide and allowed them to retake the planets the Drule had previously thought, something that had not happened before.

Moreover, the Galaxy Garrison's Marine force had finally gotten some heavy weapons added to its arsenal. Because of that, the fighting on the planets' surfaces was ferocious, the Drule occupation forces being slowly ground under.

Because of this added impetus the Drule had finally discovered that Keith was the commander of this team of humans, and started to actively question him. He found himself dragged out of the Pit of Skulls to face Lord Mormock and two other Drule lords.

One of them was a woman whose beauty was such that even Keith, not normally someone who cared overmuch about such things, noted it. Her blue skin and dark pink hair were also attention grabbing, as was her outfit. It looked like something out of a bondage catalog, but she wore it like it was normal clothing. Yet despite her beauty, Keith didn't recognize her from any of the briefings he had been given on the Drule leadership.

The other one however, he did. Zarkon stood head and shoulders above the others in height, and looked far less like a normal Drule warrior than the others, obviously a half breed of some sort given his reptilian features in contrast to the, as Lance had put it, Dark Elf look of the normal Drule. His yellow eyes were shrewd however, and his face, bore a scar down and over one eye which gave him an even more fearsome appearance. This was the Drule Emperor who had defeated Voltron, and who had slowly been annexing the Denubian Sector one system at a time.

Keith felt one of the robots jab him between his shoulders as another smacked him behind the knees, driving him to his knees. "You bow in front of your betters, dog!" Barked one of the guards.

Growling Keith would have turned and taken that guard down, but two more guards grabbed him by the back of the head and his shoulders, forcing him to bow forward. He fought back, but they were too strong and he had no leverage.

"Enough," Zarkon growled. He strode forward, staring down at Keith. "Let the human up. How else are we supposed to converse with him after all?"

"Converse? So the babble juice comes later?" Keith asked wrenching himself out of the grip of the guards as they slackened, pushing himself to his feet. Even standing straight however Keith was dwarfed by Zarkon's bulk almost as much as he would have been by Hunk.

"Perhaps, if I didn't know that Galactic Alliance operatives such as yourself are inculcated against such during your years at Galaxy Garrison," Zarkon replied dryly. He stared at Keith closely, seeing the fire in the human's eyes, the desire to lash out, yet also the control. *I wonder if the Pit of Skulls will break this one or remake him? Either way it will be interesting to see.*

Before either man could say anything, the woman spoke up from where she had remained sitting on her throne. Keith had noticed earlier the placement of those thrones, equal but in no way connected. It was evident the woman was of equal rank to Zarkon, but not his queen or otherwise involved with him. And her voice as she spoke oozed sensuality and power in equal measure. "Before we begin, has he actually been searched? I note he is still wearing the pants he arrived in at the least."

The guards stiffened, and Zarkon stood back rapidly, glaring at them and Mormock who paled noticeably. "I, your majesty Queen Merla, they were searched for weapons and scanned for any energy sources. Nothing was found."

"Truly?" the now-named Merla drawled, standing up and moving to face Keith. He forced himself to not flinch when she reached out to touch him, dragging her nails down his jaw, though he couldn't suppress a shiver of something that wasn't quite fear and wasn't quite desire at the touch as she leaned in, capturing his eyes with her own lavender eyes. "Why then do I think he is hiding something?" *"What are you hiding Commander Kogane?"*

Keith heard the voice inside his head and grimaced, realizing she was a telepath of some kind. The phenomena wasn't unknown however, and Keith and Sven (though not the others) had been given classes in how to combat such as part of officer's training. He tried to now, but in a subtle way, giving in slightly but not entirely.

"I am... a data chip on my thigh, hidden under a bit of false skin..."

Frowning Merla leaned back raking one hand down to his thigh, feeling around, smiling lightly as she felt him twitch. "Hmm rather flattering there, but that isn't what I'm looking for right now..."

She then found the small bit of his thigh that was harder than the rest, something she noted was rather difficult to discover. Kogane was in truly incredible shape. "Ahh, there it is... and what is on it?" "*What secrets does it carry?*"

"No secrets, just personal things. We didn't have enough time to back up the computer's log to a data-chip during the fight." Keith said which was true, allowing him to divert her mental assault rather like an aikido master diverting an attacker so she wouldn't try to delve deeper. They actually hadn't tried to back up their computer then, since they had always been doing so. "It mostly contains history books, movies, music and other personal things."

Merla laughed, shaking her head as she turned back. "He's telling the truth, but I think we should have it removed in any event. And if Dunbar and Vallis want us to question him I would suggest we soften this human up further. I doubt he knows anything that could help them, but his will is too strong and too controlled for me to get through without a significant amount of time. Since they asked rather than offered payment, I am certainly not going to go to that effort for free."

"Hmmm, my own questions are somewhat more pertinent than our fellow's questions about the new technology and tactics the GDF have begun using. Still, you are right, that data-chip should be analyzed." Zarkon mused.

He clapped his hands and another droid entered, listened to Zarkon's orders and then left. An instant later it came back with an aged, stoop-backed woman, her features hidden under a large hood. Keith barely had a moment to realize this might be the so-called witch Hagar before the woman held up her hand in front of his chest. Some kind of energy lashed out, freezing Keith in place, his muscles pulled taut and held there.

He grimaced in pain but there was nothing he could do as her hand traveled down to his thigh and twisted, ripping the data-chip out of the tiny synth-skin packet. A small trail of blood began to drip down Keith's thigh, soaking into his pants, but it slowed to a crawl quickly.

Hagar stood there for a moment, the data chip revolving over one outstretched hand, the blood on it being tossed off as it did, but the witch's eyes were locked on Keith's now. Turning her head lightly she spoke to Zarkon. "My liege, we should kill this one, toss him in with the next batch of sacrifices. His will is too strong,

and his mind too powerful for me to want him to remain even as a gladiator. He is a threat."

"Perhaps eventually, when we have wrung him out on the sands for a bit Hagar," Zarkon mused, staring at the young human before looking over at one of the guards. "Take that disk and analyze it." He paused as a cough from Merla caught his attention and he nodded once. "If there is nothing dangerous on it in terms of viruses copy everything on the chip for Queen Merla."

As Merla nodded, and Kieth wondered about the words 'next batch of sacrifices' Zarkon turned back to Hagar. "Now however, let us see if this human knows anything about further GDF movement in the Denubian sector..."

With Hagar and Merla both there, Keith could not easily dissemble so instead of simply trying to stonewall them Keith gave them everything he could about the GDF's operation in to the contested sector but in such a way that they couldn't get a hint of his secret mission. Hagar and Zarkon between them wrung out several things Keith hadn't realized he had known, along with the route his team had followed since entering the Denubian Sector, but nothing that pointed to that central secret.

During the interrogation the robot which had left with the data chip returned, carrying the original chip, a copy and a data reader complete with small wireless headset. Merla popped the copy in, and leaned back, looking at the reader as she skived through the files on the chip. She smiled occasionally then shook her head and pulled her headset off, saying nothing for the rest of the interrogation.

As Keith was led off, Merla rose, walking with the group of guards escorting, or rather dragging Keith away. He only let that go on for a few moments before pulling out of their grip and standing on his own two feet, unwilling to give into the pain. Unlike Merla's mental touch, Hagar's magic was painful in the extreme, worse than the pain sticks.

Seeing this Merla smiled, and reached out a small tendril of her power into the commander's mind. "*Commander, what would you do if I commanded you to join me in my chambers for the evening?*"

Keith stopped, turning to look at her and Merla held up a hand stopping the guards from dragging him off. For a moment she saw his lips twitch, and she wondered if he would actually accede to her random request. Then he shook his head, bowing lightly from the waste. "Some things should not be commanded, Queen Merla. You certainly would not get my best... performance under such duress."

Merla surprised herself by howling in laughter, shaking her head sending her dark pink hair flying as she did. "That is the nicest way of saying no I've heard in a long

time." She smiled thinly at the human. "Then again, I rarely ask at all. Bear that in mind if we see one another again, human."

It had just been a whim after all, Merla was not the kind of woman to take random slaves to her bed, certainly not slaves that were owned by another lord however minor. Keith was a fine specimen, but it took far more than a decent face and a large package to gain her favor, even for a simple roll in the sheets.

With a final toss of her head, she turned away, feeling Keith's eyes on her before he was prodded into motion again. She had spent enough time on Doom already and had to return to her own realm. It had been an interesting diversion, and she was oddly interested in going over the books this human had thought interesting enough to keep on hand, but Merla had her own duties to see to.

About a month after that, Kieth and the others found out what Hagar had meant when she spoke of sacrifices. A group of newly conquered aliens were brought in from another Drule nation, and sold to Hagar on Planet Doom. Speaking to the other slaves, Kieth and the others learned that the majority would then be sent on further into Zarkon's kingdom, where they would be sacrificed, their life forces drained to help Hagar create the robeasts.

How this was done, no one knew but many had actually seen the process from a long distance when she did it once on Planet Doom as a presentation. The price in lives to create a robeast was incredibly high, but as one of the slaves commented that didn't matter to the Drule. It simply meant they could then come in and colonize new planets without having to deal with the locals.

The whole thing horrified all of the team, but there was scant they could do here and now.

Soon after that something far worse than being questioned in such a manner happened to Keith and his team: the notoriety of the five humans began to fade in the public conscious of the audience. The Drule had their fill of the underdog winning and the idea of wanting to see them broken grew stronger with every passing day. The guards began to withhold food, and even medical supplies, and began to push the five of them into more and more fights on a daily basis.

This came to a head as Pidge, despite Lance and the others trying to cover for him, was forced out to fight a massive bruiser of an alien who made Hunk look small and was even stronger for his size. The rest were herded into the waiting area along with several dozen slaves, a small dugout-like structure set into the side of the arena along one wall, hidden from the doors the bigger doors used for the more important matches. They watched their friend anxiously, shouting encouragement and advice

whenever they could, but their voices were drowned out by the sound of the crowds above them.

Pidge danced around the giant alien, which looked like some kind of stone golem creature with tiny red eye set into a squashed, pudgy face. Ducking and weaving, he hurled rocks or bones occasionally trying to find a weak point, closing sometimes when his opponent was off-balance. But he simply couldn't hurt the big beast enough to put him down. Worse, Pidge was tiring quickly, the lack of good food over the past few weeks was telling.

Eventually Pidge slowed down, tripping for just a second as he made to leap away from a blow from the big alien. The things fist smashed into his side, sending Pidge hurtling through the air to land in an undignified heap. He was able to get away from the foot stomp that would've claimed his life and continued to roll away until he was far enough to get to his feet. But now he was limping badly. It was obviously only a matter of time before the big beast finished Pidge off.

Watching this from the sidelines Keith snarled, his lips bared as he looked over at his friends. "Everybody ready?"

Hunks eyes had begun to look literally glow, his knuckles cracking. "Let me at him Keith! All show him strength's not everything, technique counts too!"

"No!" Keith said sharply. "Take out the guards when I give the signal. Sven, Lance, create a distraction among the guards until I get out there. I'll take that big beast out."

"You got it!" Sven said cracking his neck one side and eyeing up a few of the guards. He'd have to push through some of the other slave-gladiators to get to them, but that was fine by him.

"Ready, now!" Keith roared, surprising his friends as he leapt forward, pushing several of the prisoners in front of him into the guards separating Keith and the others from the entrance to the small dugout.

Before the guards could reply, he was in among them rolling past them out onto the sand. Behind him, Sven and the others pushed other prisoners towards the guards, causing enough of a ruckus that the guards didn't notice that Keith had passed them by, and was now racing over the sands. The audience had, and roared out, some in rage at seeing another human interrupt their blood sport, some happy, seeing this added bit of amusement.

Keith ignored them, concentrating on his target. Ahead of him the big beast had grabbed Pidge up right, I was about to smash him with another haymaker. The thing's hands were bigger than Pidge's head, and there was no way Pidge could take

another hit like that.

Some sixth sense warned the beast Keith was coming up behind it, and it turned, tossing Pidge towards Keith. "RAHHHH!"

But Keith dove forward rolling underneath his friend, whispering a hasty up "sorry Pidge!" To the younger boy as he tumbled past. Then Keith's hand flashed out to grab up the small rapier that Pidge had been given to use this fight, another sign their captors had begun to stack the deck against them.

Keith came up onto his feet again racing forward. When he was in arms' reach the beast punched out at him, but Keith jumped up, alighting for a brief moment on the alien's arm and stabbing forward. The alien's other fist came up crashing into Keith's shoulder and chest, hurling Keith away.

He rolled in the sand, then staring over at the alien. The giant rock alien swayed on its feet before falling to its side, the rapier thrust into its eye. Keith had a moment to smile grimly before he was swarmed under by several android guards. Several pain sticks descended and Keith fell into darkness.

For a time, Keith didn't know where he was. Flashes of images, of memory bombarded his mind. Images of his parents, of his abusive grandfather, of his ex-girlfriend/stalker. All of those swirled together with the dream of someone, a girl he thought with silver hair he had never met and of a roaring lion a massive adult male snarling in fury as it faced the Hunter.

Eventually however he returned to the here and now with Sven shaking his shoulder. "Keith, Keith, can you hear me?"

"Erg, some, somewhat Keith groaned, looking around at the others. They had seemed to have been exposed to the pain sticks, he could see the welts on Sven and Lance's bare forearms and necks and only the darkness of their cell kept him from seeing the same on Hunk.

"How, How bad are we off?" he asked, wincing. He could see Lance seemed alright beyond the shaking from pain-stick exposure, but Sven's face was a mass of bruises. One eye was swollen shut, and his cheek a large black and blue blotch.

Pidge quickly moved over to Keith, grabbing his arm gratefully despite Hunk's protest as he put the finishing touch on a splint on the younger man's wrist. The large man had begun to act like their team doctor, despite not having any real knowledge about it. "The only good thing about pain-sticks is that the damage they do wears off over time, so the three of us will be alright. As for Pidge here, that large beastie wrenched his arm out of its socket, but we put it right. He's also got a broken wrist, but this makeshift splint should help. It's the best we can do anyway, so it better!"

"You're the worst of us," Hunk went on, moving over to Keith. "They barely bothered with the pain-sticks on you after knocking you out. You've got at least three broken ribs, and I thought for sure your jaw was broken too. You also might have some internal injuries that I can't diagnose."

Keith grunted, moving around for a moment stopping as his ribs pained him, but he couldn't feel anything beyond that. And he wasn't willing to let his team know how badly he was injured. "I don't think so. My ribs are at worst sprained, not broken, and I don't feel anything else wrong. But it's not like we'll be getting any medical attention anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"Ya, were an embarrassment to Mormock at this point. He's used us to 'earn' as much money as he can, and he was going to discard us before we showed that we're a threat to discipline and order around here," Sven replied dryly pointing at his own face. "He did this to me personally to show his displeasure about that. He picked me out because you and I were the most popular among the crowds at one point."

"We need to leave now," Keith replied, wincing as he stood upright thanking Sven with a nod as his friend helped him to his feet.

"Were not exactly in the best condition to try anything!" Hunk objected, but then he sighed. "But you're right, we're not going to get any better. We don't have enough real weapons though, small knives aren't going to cut it against soldiers especially their android infantry. "We'll have to rely on sneaking around, and I'm not exactly built for that."

"Doesn't matter, we have to go now, or we won't be able to. Pidge are you still up for it?" Keith asked, looking over the younger man.

Pidge nodded seriously. "I'm up for it sir."

He looked up at a window that was around three stories up from the floor of the room they had been housed in since being brought here. It was evident that the room was going to be redesigned eventually to have three floors, but it hadn't yet and the window faced out and away from the rest of the Pit of Skulls. Pidge climbed up the side of the wall easily despite his injuries.

Reaching it, he pulled himself into the small crevice there, and then pulled out the seemingly solid bars, tossing them down to Sven who caught them quickly. Outside the window was a ledge large enough for even Hunk to stand on, used primarily by the large vulture-like flyers that made their homes around here. "All clear but let's hurry! Going by the position of the moon, we've got about thirty minutes before we see the next patrol."

Hunk pushed aside his bed, and reached into the secret hole there. Pulling out

the makeshift rope they had created, handing it to Sven who began to twirl it around like a bolas, thanks to a large stone tied to one edge of it, before he hurled it up towards Pidge.

Pidge ducked out of the way as it sailed through the window shaking his head. Even with one eye you're a damn good shot," he whispered looking down at his friends, as he quickly tied the cloth rope to the one remaining bar. He pulled on it, then nodded. "It's ready as it's gonna get."

"Lance your next, then Sven then Hunk then me," Keith ordered.

Hunk made to object but Keith held up a hand. "I'm the commander, I make the rules. If you can't get through that window, there is no way I am leaving a man behind!"

"And you think we would!?" Lance asked angrily, reaching forward to grab Keith by his shirt, pulling him close. "I thought after so many months together, you'd have realized that we..."

"I would rather some of us live and get out of here rather than all of us die," Keith said quietly, making no move to remove Lance's hands from his shirt.

"And we'd rather die together than apart," Lance said, moving back slightly while Hunk muttered agreement.

"Then we better figure out how to get Hunk through that window," Sven said reaching over to grasp his friend's shoulder.

Lance hauled himself up the rope followed by Sven. Pidge had already climbed down the outer side of the tower that they had been kept in which like the rest of the Pit of Skulls looked like something out of the Dark Ages, or perhaps a Vampire novel. The youngest member of the team was already hidden among the bushes down below.

With effort, the two of them helped Hunk climb up the rope, having to move aside as he tried to push his bulk through.

It was a tight squeeze, and he winced as the stones of the window cut into his side and back, but he eventually was able to push himself through. He used the rope to get down to where Pidge was hiding, and Lance followed quickly leaving Sven to pull up the rope and toss it back down to Keith. After pushing Hunk's bed back and tossing up the bag of makeshift weapons Keith pulled himself up, gritting his teeth against the pain of his ribs, and eventually Sven had to help pulling the rest the way up. The two of them stayed crouching on the window ledge for a moment, then nodded at one another and continued their escape.

Ducking from cover to cover, the group made their slow way over to the spaceport, hiding in amongst several cargo haulers for a moment. Surprisingly security

outside of the arena and its incumbent barracks was almost nonexistent. There were a few androids patrolling here and there, and a kind of small triangular floating sentry camera in some places, but there weren't enough of them to do more than slow Keith and his men down.

However, a lot of the ships parked at the port had their own heavily armed guards standing by the landing ramps. Only four didn't, and Keith looked at them closely for a moment, before signaling his team to wait where they were. Moving closer, he stopped once he was close enough for the smell of one of the ships to hit him then nodded, and moved back to the others I found our escape ship.

Arriving back, he found three dead guards bundled in with them and looked at the rest of his team. Sven leaned in close, whispering, "Two of them came on us just as you left, the other one followed a moment later. What are we going to do?"

Keith thought for a moment, then sighed. "Take the bodies with us, we can't leave any hint of our escape. Now come on, I've found a ship we can use."

With Hunk and Lance carrying the bodies the team followed him, but stopped at the smell of the ship hated them all one by one. Lance couldn't stop himself, and leaned in to whisper harshly "why are we getting on a shit ship?"

Lips twitching at the unofficial name for fertilizer haulers the universe over Keith shrugged. "Can you think of a ship that would have to deal with less red tape and security?"

Sven nodded reluctant agreement, adding "Besides, fertilizer can be made to explode easily."

"Oh joy, were not only on a shit ship we're on a fucking shit bomb," Lance muttered, but followed the others onto the ship quickly.

Hiding aboard the ship was relatively easy. Despite its huge size, the crew complement was only four Drule or exceptionally shabby appearance. Three of whom had nothing to do except cart in the large barrels of fertilizer which filled the large hold. The fourth was the pilot, who didn't leave the cockpit while the team was finding places to hide. They waited till the ship took off and was well on its way before moving, killing all four of the Drule aboard quickly and silently.

Easing the body of his victim out of the pilot chair Lance sat down, looking at the controls morbidly. "This isn't the first choice I'd want for a ship under my control after so long, but any port in a storm. So where to, boss. And I gotta tell you this hyperspace engine isn't powerful enough to move more than a few parsecs at a time."

Keith looked at the others seeing no one else had any opinions they wanted to share and he finally said "Arus." He didn't realize he was going to say that until he did,

but afterwards, it made a lot of sense.

"Are you serious?" Lance asked, turning around his pilot's chair to give Keith a glare, while Pidge and Hunk looked at Keith askance. "We're still going to try and complete our mission?"

"No," Keith said coldly. "We're not. Not at least the way our superiors think we should anyway. I have no interest in stealing Voltron or the lions away from their people, but I do have some interest in Voltron. We know now how robeasts are made. Finding a weapon to stop that kind of evil, that I'm very interested in! Besides, Arus is a hell of a lot closer than the Galactic Alliance."

The other four looked at one another then as one nodded. The idea of ritualistic sacrifice being used to create the robeasts horrified them all. Lance was the only one who still looked a little uneasy about the idea. He wanted to go back to galaxy Garrison, but then again, Arras was sure a hell of a lot closer, and all of them felt very ambivalent to the GDF for ordering them out on this mission in the first place. "All right, you're the boss."

With that, the cargo ship began to pick-up speed, jumping to hyperspace quickly.

OOOOOOO

The team's escape was discovered the next day when a squadron of robot guards and their overseer was sent to fetch them for their day's matches. He discovered the jail cell empty, and no sign of how they escaped. Fearing for his life as all bringers of bad news did among the Drule he nonetheless roused the guards, before cautiously telling his lord what had occurred.

Mormock quizzed the local space radar and control analysts, and they found a ship that had deviated somewhat from its flight plan before going into hyperspace. Ships could not change course in hyperspace, so that gave Mormock at least a straight line to start searching along. "Ready my light cruiser! No one escapes from Planet Doom, no one! *They better not, or will be my hide that pays for it!*

Unbowed We Raise Our Flag...

With a full day's lead and the fact that they weren't making stopovers and had no interest in conserving fuel, the shit ship as Lance continued call their ship was able to keep a lead on their pursuers for a time, but after several days the light cruiser, with

its faster engines, caught them. Between one jump and the next the light cruiser came out of hyperspace right on their heels shooting at them before they could register its present.

The limited shields the shit ship had to ward off meteor impacts fell almost instantly, and the hits rained down on the hull of the large ship, only its bulk protecting it for a moment. "Jump us out Lance!" Keith ordered from where he was strapped in the copilot's chair. The others were strapped down in the crew compartment, the only place in the ship that had safety harnesses.

"I haven't inputted the next jump!" Lance protested. "There's no way to tell where we'll come out except in the vaguest, and y'know, deadliest fucking terms!"

"It's either jump now or we die!" Keith shouted, reaching over to slap the jump button on Lance's control board. Lance grimaced but didn't try to stop him as another hammer blow smashed into their hull, blowing chunks of it out into space.

A second later they had jumped, only to almost immediately come back out, having slammed into something that threw all of them five of them back into the harnesses as if they just gone from 0 to mock setting. Warning lights abounded, and the gravity of the ship cutout abruptly as did a lot of the power. "Shit! We hit a gravity well, came out too close to the sun!" Lance shouted.

Keith didn't reply, simply reaching over to squeeze Lance's shoulder. Lance took this to mean that was all up to him to do his best, and he grinned like a madman, pulling and tugging at the controls of the ship, but they were unresponsive. Luckily for them, they actually were close to a planet, a blue and brown planet, with patches of green here and there. Seeing it, Keith whistled. "Well we might be out of control, but we at least reached our destination Lance. That's Arus."

"Joy, doesn't mean I want to die here," Lance grunted. An instant later they hit atmosphere but Lance continued to slow down, looking for a place to land.

He was rather spoiled for choice. There was a lot of open spaces below them, where cities had originally been, towns smashed flat, buildings demolished from on high, entire forests seared from orbital bombardment. "This might be Arus, sure as hell didn't look like anyone's here," Lance whispered, the sight taking his breath away for a moment despite their dire straits.

"Any port in a storm," Keith replied, his own voice equally solemn. "Can you get us down?"

"I can get us down," Lance said, turning all his attention once more to the fighting the controls. "But there is no fucking way we're going to be lifting off."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

A second later the two pilots were again flung back in their chairs as the ship plowed nose first into the ground of what had been a city center, now barren ground with only a few dilapidated buildings around them. The ship actually flipped several times before coming to land with a crash.

Keith hung on grimly, biting back the pain of his ribs being pressed hard by the straps of his chair until the world stopped turning. Once he was certain the ship had stopped moving, he gingerly pushed himself to his feet. "Let's go!" He shouted into the intercom, before reaching out to grab Lance. Lance had slammed his head into the console, his head lolling limply. Keith checked, but Lance hadn't broken his neck, merely knocked himself out. Cursing under his breath he pulled the other man onto his shoulder and rushed out of the cockpit carrying him in a fireman's carry.

Quickly passing through the ship, Keith nodded to Sven who had moved out of his room the crewman's area and into the large hanger bay, trailing some kind of wire that he had created over the past few days. Sven nodded back, then raced after him trailing the wire. "Not that I think this ship needed it, but when this goes up, it's going to go out with a bang!"

"Good, we'll need it to blow sky-high so that our pursuers have to assume that were dead. The bodies of the guards you all dealt with will come in handy here." Keith replied.

"Cold but a good idea," Sven replied.

The two of them plus the unconscious Lance reached the edge of the shattered forest beyond the city's edge where they found Hunk and Pidge waiting for them. Hunk quickly grabbed Lance off of Keith's shoulders, carrying him over one of his own massive shoulders for a time racing on grimly with the others. They soon found a hiding place nearby, a sort of hidden crevice created by downed trees and the refuse of wind and rain on the outskirts of the city.

There the team waited watching the sky while Hunk looked over Lance, shaking his head slightly. "He might have a concussion, but I don't think it'll be a serious one. He'll be out for a while though, I think again. Damn it, one of us really needs to get some medical training at some point."

"I'll put it on the list Hunk, right now though it is a bit impossible..." Keith replied from where he and the others were laying out near the entrance to the small hideaway. A second later there was a massive explosion which destroyed the ship and blew up the remains of the buildings all around it.

Pidge whistled slightly, looking over at Sven with respect. "You can create that big an explosion with just some fertilizer?"

"Fertilizer, the gas it creates, some of the volatile fuels from the hyperspace engine. These are a few of my favorite things," Sven quipped, his eyes lighting up with unholy delight as he watched the explosion.

"Now we just have to hope that whoever is after us can't tell the difference between a dead drule corpse and a dead human corpse once it's been fried" Keith said, turning his gaze up towards the sky as a tiny dot appeared there.

OOOOOO

"Your highness, something's happening." Allura looked up from going over a few figures in the ongoing work to discover low-tech varieties for various immune shots with the few surviving doctors among the community turning to the young man interrupted them.

"Yes?" Coran asked before she could speak, causing her to glare at him lightly before turning to the younger man.

"Sky watch just reported that a ship crash-landed nearby your highness, right into the old capital city." The man reported, not turning from Allura, something which she smiled at internally.

Allura and Coran both quickly stood up and made for the door, and this time Allura got her words out first. "Grab several sets of binoculars, then arm the guard, and set a few teams each of the entrances just in case. Then get Gareth and his men, they are the best at sneaking around and we'll need to find out what's going on."

"Your highness," Coran said sharply, grabbing her shoulder. "You can't go out there. If there's any kind of danger..."

"Coran we've been over this," Allura growled, smacking his hand away. "You can't keep me in a cage, and I refuse to let my people face a threat I would not."

"This is no job for princess! What your mother would think..."

"My mother is dead! So is my father! So is practically every other noble house on this planet!" Allura shouted suddenly fed up with this argument. "The past is dead Coran! Let it go, or else!" With that she pushed him to one side before he could retaliate, and strode out of the small cave they had been meeting him.

She met up with several young men and women, all of them armed and dressed in makeshift camouflage, moving towards the main entrance. From there, they made their cautious way out, before they went to ground, raising their binoculars to stare at the sky and then the explosion that had occurred in the center city. "That was a very big explosion, what could've cause that?" Allura asked, though she didn't really

expect a reply. She heard several theories, but no one within the community had any knowledge of spacecraft or explosives.

One of them said, "We'd have to get in close to see your highness."

Allura shook her head. "No we remain hidden for now. Look," she said pointing up into the sky where she had noticed a star suddenly descending. That star soon came close enough to take on an actual shape, a Drule light cruiser which launched several starfighters and a single shuttle down towards the planet.

A part of her, the part Allura knew was the one connected directly to the blue lion, wanted to challenge these interlopers, wanted to rip them apart and start to fight back against the people who had killed her father and so many millions of her people. But she knew they couldn't. A single lion could never stave off the might of the Drule Empire.

As they watched, the shuttle touched down out of sight in the city ruins. For several hours after that there was nothing new to see. Coran and some of the others joined them, Coran noticeably glaring at Allura for a moment, before turning away. Evidently he had decided that causing an argument out here in the open especially with so many witnesses was not worth the effort. Allura was happy to see that, but she also realized that at some point the two of them would have to come to an understanding of who was really in charge around here. Two years ago it would have been Coran, now, now Allura felt she could take on that role, with or without him.

They were still when the Drule ship lifted from the wreckage returning to its mother ship quickly. There was a moment of tense silence, then the starfighters returned to their hangers. An instant later the light cruiser opened fire down into the city. What it was targeting none of them could see from the current vantage, but after only a few moments it was content with the wreckage it caused and turned heading back up into the stratosphere and out into space.

"Okay, back into the caverns, we'll wait for night to finish falling. After that, Gareth I want you to take your team out and see what you can find in the city," Allura replied. "The rest of us will follow a little after you just in case."

Gareth nodded, but Coran moved in, frowning heavily at Allura and she fought to keep her eyes from rolling in irritation. *Here we go again...*

OOOOOO

Keith and the others remained in hiding for a while after the Drule ship had left, making certain whoever it was in command up there wasn't trying to bluff them

out. Then as night fell, Keith and Sven moved out, scouting around the area before returning quickly, gathering up the others. Lance was still unconscious from hitting his head, but Hunk carried him over one shoulder without any appreciable sign of exertion.

With Sven erasing their back trail and Keith in the lead, the group made their way north of their starting point. "Any idea where we're going boss?" Pidge asked from where he was following right behind Keith.

"To that mountain range over there, the one with a bit of the range sticking out towards the castle on the other side of that little lake." Keith replied, pointing ahead in the darkness. The mountains were a more solid shade of darkness against the backdrop of the nighttime sky, but the stars had begun to come out in force, and along with the moon did provide enough light for them to see by, at least somewhat.

"Why?"

"If I was a survivor I'd want to bury myself as deep as I could, mountains are good for that kind of thing. And it being so close to the capital it might have been a designated fall back point. At least I hope so." Keith said grimly.

The team fell silent for a time, just breathing in the air of the planet, the first free air they had breathed for over six months. The lights in the sky looked particularly bright, and once or twice the young men grinned at one another, reaching out to smack one another on the shoulders in glee. They were free!

Even Keith couldn't stop himself from grinning despite his ribs once more painning him as he led the way through the darkness. He stopped however, staring ahead of their route and a little to the side seeing movement out there. He held up a hand signaling the group to halt, but he stopped speaking as Lance, still on Hunk's broad shoulder, let out a groan and began to stir.

He was about to turn to look at him when another flash of movement caught his attention and he hurled himself to one side, dodging an arrow of all things.

"Ambush right and forward! Get down and then close!"

Rolling to his feet Keith leaped up and forward nodding another arrow and a thrown spear, disappearing into a bit of bush for a second before charging forward, crashing into one of their attackers, and taking him down quickly.

Hunk and the others had gone to ground as the first arrows flew, followed by a scattered number of blaster bolts. At the back of the team Sven, not under attack yet, began to circle to one side, coming in at the attacks from their flank. Now faced with Sven and Keith in close the attackers stopped firing at the others trying to overwhelm the two officers in close combat. But Pidge and then Hunk raced forward to join the

fight.

The large man bowled two of their attackers over entirely, getting a brief glimpse of long tapered ears on either side of a human face. It was enough and he shouted aloud, "Don't kill any of them they're locals!"

"Fine and dandy, but they are still trying to kill us!" Sven grunted, grabbing a knife trying to stab into his side, twisting and kicking out sending the attacker rolling away.

"We're already making a bad first impression, yet killing them would serve no one. No blasters!" Keith ordered, smashing one attacker down to his knees with the blunt end of the man's spear, which he had already ripped out of his grip.

That seemed to be the last attacker, and he was about to order the others to tie them up when more locals arrived on the scene. Unwilling to try and shoot at the group of GDF officers given they were standing over their downed fellows this group simply charged in, wielding spears and knives against the five humans.

Hunk turned seeing a slightly shorter woman than Keith or Sven launching a punch at him, her features obscured by a balaclava. He raised a hand expecting to block it easily only to be pushed back by the power of the girl's punch. Because of that he was off balance, unable to block the kick that slammed into his chest, sending him to his knees gasping for air.

Seeing his friend in distress, Keith hurled one of the new attackers aside and charged, a knife hand nearly taking the slightly shorter woman in the neck. She dodged at the last second and tried to grab his hand, but Keith pulled back faster than she could grab at him, and then had to dodge a kick that nearly took her in the side before once more bouncing backwards.

She responded however in a way that before meeting Hagar Keith would never have believed possible, launching some kind of energy blast his way which he only barely dodged, his ribs screaming at him again for the contortion but he powered through. "Wow, okay, didn't expect that!"

Growling the woman closed in launching haymaker after haymaker at him, but Keith, having seen the impact her kick had on Hunk dodged or redirected them instead of blocking. He did so with some ease despite the strength of them, though he still had to wince occasionally from the way his ribs were now really beginning to get to him.

The two of them danced around one another, while the rest of the battle continued the better trained and far more experienced GDF team against the natives' numbers. Seeing this Keith could only shake his head muttering to himself between

one blow and the next. "Well, so much for friendly contact with the locals."

"You try to capture my people and call it friendly contact?!" The woman he was fighting replied, before flashing a fist forward, launching another energy attack.

But Keith had seen her rearing her fist back and ducked underneath the energy blast, kicking out and disrupting the woman's stance. Grabbing the woman's outstretched hand as she flailed for a second he twisted it behind her before she could recover twisting his body around behind her and putting his other arm going around her throat in a choke hold.

"Miss we didn't start this fight," Keith said having heard the woman reply to his mutter in Galactic Standard and knowing she could understand him, and frankly wanting to end this fight before his ribs gave out on him or Sven lost his temper. "Your people started to fire at us and after the last few months we've had, none of us are in the fight frame of mind to take that kind of thing without responding in kind."

"You have an odd way of showing your good intentions," the woman growled, trying to throw him off. But despite her admittedly prodigious strength, Keith had sparred with Hunk numerous times during their years at Galaxy Garrison, and knew how to hold her in such a way she couldn't get free.

"...You have a point I suppose. But we could have killed some of your people. We didn't." Keith replied, then after a moment's hesitation, released his hold around the girl's throat and on arm. Moving backwards two steps he held his hands up over his head even as another grimace came to his lips. "So how about that for a show of good faith?"

"Kiet' you sure you know what you're doing?" Sven asked, standing over three downed men with a spear in his hands.

"Stand down team," Keith ordered, looking around at his friends. "Let's not make this any worse than it already is."

The woman turned to him, her eyes vague pools of darkness under her balaclava but the anger had leached out of her stance, replaced by confusion and some amusement. The source of the amusement suddenly arrived in a rush of wind and a thump as a giant metallic blue lion landed with a thunderous roar. Despite looking robotic, it acted almost lifelike, rearing back roaring before leaning down over the woman's shoulder.

"Oh crap!" Hunk gulped, staring up at the giant robot. Pidge too was staring at it, but in his case it was awe and interest rather than fear.

Sven simply stared silently, then glanced down to the spear he had taken from their attackers then from it to the attackers who he could now see were smirking at

him in the light of the lion's eyes. "Yes, well..." he sighed and dropped the spear.

"Somehow I just feel inadequate now."

Keith breathed in, fighting back a wince that his previous enemy would now be able to see relatively easily. *Damn, that thing is lot more intimidating in person than in a picture.* No longer in anything even close to a position of strength, Keith fell back on humor. "In my defense I let you go before the giant blue lion who is now standing over you oh-so-protectively arrived."

Laughing quietly the girl he had been fighting nodded, but then looked at him closely, though for what reason Keith couldn't say until she spoke. There was concern evident in her voice despite the fact they had been fighting mere moments ago. "I know I didn't hit you, so why do you look like you're in pain? Were you hurt before I arrived?"

"He has at least four bruised ribs from a incident before our escape from the Drule ma'am," Hunk said, moving over to Keith as did the others.

"Wait, he was throwing me around like that on bruised ribs?" The woman's incredulity came through there, but she seemed to get over it quickly, remembering this wasn't quite the time to have a discussion on their disparate skill levels. "But you said we attacked you?" She looked around, quickly identifying one of the locals and speaking to him in the local tongue.

He replied in the same tongue, glaring at the outsiders for a moment and gesturing down the trail. As he did so however, Lance walked up, rubbing his head as he looked up at the looming robot lion. "Um, hi guys... and people I don't know, um... yeah... everyone can see the giant blue lion right? It's not just a hallucination brought about by my concussion?"

Hearing Lance speak in Galactic Standard the man the woman had been speaking to cut off, and from what Keith could see his expression shifted from angry to sheepish. The woman started to giggle, a sound that made Keith wonder how old she was, he would have guessed his age, but the giggle made her sound younger. "Hehehe, Gar, Gareth says he attacked you because he heard someone groaning and saw a person being carried by your large friend. He feared you were trying to kidnap someone from another community of survivors."

"Ah," Keith said diplomatically his own lips twitching, while the rest of the men and the few women around them broke out into rueful laughter occasionally interrupted by gasps of pain. "So now that we have the bad first impressions out of the way, may I know who I'm addressing? I'm Commander Keith Kogane late of the GDF and this is my team. My second in command is Sven Holgremsson over there with the

spear, Hunk is the large man who you kicked earlier, impressive strength by the way. Pidge is the little fellow but don't let his size or age fool you he's as tough as they come. And that is Lance ace pilot. I will however apologize in advance for anything embarrassing that comes out of his mouth."

Allura laughed while Lance protested his innocence loudly. She spent a moment translating his words for the other locals then bowed her head slightly to Keith. "If you are from the GDF, I hope you bring some good news commander. As for my name, I am Allura, sometimes called the princess of Arus, and paladin of the Blue Lion."

As she said the words the lion roared as if in agreement before leaning down. Its large muzzle came to rest on the ground behind Allura, letting out something that its listeners could only interpret as a purr as Allura rested a hand on the robot lion's muzzle. *Blue sounds happy, or perhaps eager?* Interesting, and just as telling to her as the way Keith had let her go when he had her at his mercy.

Pidge at this point couldn't contain himself any longer and he rushed forward actually moving past Allura to gaze rapturously at the large robot, trying to look at it from every angle but the lack of light save from the robot's own eyes stopped him. "Wow, it's huge, and look at how easily it moves, all those moving parts! How do you control it is it voice, psionic, gene-locked?"

Allura had to fight back a smile at the one called Pidge's exuberance. From what she could see was a very young man, possibly three years or more younger than herself, her look of wide-eyed wonder making him seem younger as he hopped in place despite his wrist being held in a very makeshift splint. Hunk too moved forward to look at the lion, the sparkle in his eyes and the grin on his face destroying any idea that the large man was dangerous despite his hulking frame. *My decision to target him first as the most dangerous of them was certainly in error.*

The others were of the same general height but there the similarities ended, and Allura had to fight back a blush at the sight of the commander in the light of Blue's eyes. Dressed in black pants and a tight white and very ripped shirt that left nothing to the imagination, he stood about two inches or so taller than her, his bare arms showing both muscles and a tremendous amount of definition. Under a wild mane of black hair his face was also handsome, dominated by a strong chin, thin cheekbones and expressive brown eyes which seemed to grab hers and not let go.

"Don't mind him. Pidge doesn't mean anything he's just a tech nut," Keith supplied, now openly holding his ribs. "Sven, corral Pidge please. Lance, can you walk?" At Lance's indignant nod, Keith looked over at Hunk who gave him a thumb's up and

Kieth turned back to Allura. "Can we get undercover, please? We have a lot to talk about, but I don't think we should do it out in the open."

"Agreed." Allura gestured, and The Blue Lion moved backwards, walking along beside them, moving very slowly. "We'll lead you back to our community, but realize I will still be watching you."

"Baby you can watch me all you want..." Lance said smoothly, moving over to walk beside her. Even with her face covered both the body shape and Allura's voice told him she would be a rare beauty.

"Hunk!" Keith barked not even looking at Lance.

Before Allura could think of being offended or Lance could try and dodge he found himself picked up and moved bodily away by the gentle giant. Watching this, Allura decided to laugh. Shaking her head she looked over at Keith, seeing that the other two, Pidge and Sven had moved to walk beside their leader, both of them sending him worried looks. Deciding not to mention his injuries again since the man seemed to want to ignore them, Allura asked, "So, what caused the explosion back there?"

Moments later they met up with another group of the locals and were introduced to Coran, an older man with a handlebar mustache that seemed to have a life of its own. Keith almost instantly detected some tension between him and Allura as the princess led them through the complex, but had no idea what caused it.

As they went inside the caves, he explained where they had come from, but nothing more just yet. At the same time, he and his team were looking around them, taking note of everything in sight.

"No one has ever escaped from Planet Doom before," Coran said shaking his head. "You must be brave warriors indeed to manage that feat. But if you are from Galaxy Garrison, does that mean they sent you to aid us?"

Allura seemed to stiffen at that, but didn't say anything while Keith slowly shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The logistics of doing so would be a nightmare. I hate to say it, but our original mission was not nearly as honorable as that."

The two local leaders fell silent at that, saying nothing as they continued to move through the underground community. Inside the cavern it was even darker than outside at first then there were tiny glow lights, just enough to make them able to see where they were going for a time until they were deeper into the mountains. "362," Sven muttered in Keith's ear.

He looked at him and nodded back, indicating he had noticed too. 362 people total, with only about eighty of fighting age and fitness, along with over a hundred

children of pre-teen to young teen age, though their numbers were much harder to be certain about. Unless there were more people elsewhere on the planet, the Drule had done perhaps the most thorough job of annihilating a planetary population that Keith had ever heard of.

They eventually crossed a threshold from one cave to the next. This cave was brighter, lit by several torches one in each corner, and with a low-slung table in the center along with several chairs and two heavy sofas in the corners. There was even a makeshift door made out of pieces from three doors nailed together, which closed behind them as Allura gestured to someone else, a young woman with loose black hair to close it.

She looked over the five newcomers appraisingly, before moving over to stand by the door, closing it firmly and standing like a guard, her hand dropping to the first blaster the team had seen since their arrival.

For a moment all was silent then Allura reached up to her balaclava pulling to off and throwing it down onto the table as she massaged her long ears. "Those things are so uncomfortable, darn it."

"You needn't have worn it at all highness," Coran said tartly, his words giving the words more meaning than a simple comment on the princess's mask.

"In terms of uncomfortable things I've had to deal with Coran, that barely registers in comparison to some things that are becoming far too irritating for me to deal with at all," Allura glared at the older man, before turning to look at the newcomers, taking in the opportunity to examine them more closely.

For his part, Keith could not look away from Allura's face. The pants and loose long-sleeved shirt she had been wearing had not done much to hide her figure true, but Allura's face completed the image. She had long silver hair cascading in wild waves down her back and over her long, pointed ears which framed a face with high cheek bones with a small, almost cute chin. Her skin color was something between a tan and the color of milk chocolate. And her eyes, they were the deepest, most expressive blue he had ever seen.

"Wow," Pidge breathed, while Hunk and Sven simply stared. Lance smiled, his eyes raking over the princess' body flirtatiously, but didn't move to say anything just yet.

Shaking his head, Keith tried to push past his own reaction to the younger woman's looks to address the reason why they were here.. "I said I would tell you more of our mission, and I will. But first, let me say that my team and I have no longer decided to follow our original orders. So please don't take your anger about them out

on us."

Allura's eyes dimmed, becoming colder for a moment. "I see... Blue didn't startle you nearly as much as she should have... Your mission has to deal with the lions then?"

"Yes. Our orders were twofold: first, survey the Denubian sector and discover what we can about how Zarkon and the Drule as a whole are spreading into the sector. And second... have you heard of robeasts?" Keith asked, pausing for a moment.

The locals both shook their heads as two more people entered. One of them was a young man who Keith instantly recognized as the one who had taken control of their weapons when they entered the caves, the other was a slightly older woman who moved with purpose and respectability, yet also quickly took a subordinate position directly behind Allura.

"Robeasts are giant monstrous robots larger than even the Blue Lion." Keith explained, going on to describe them in greater detail, the effect they had been having on the previously cold war between the two major galactic powers, and then how they were created, and how they had discovered that.

Allura was the first one to understand the implications. "Our, our people, the, the thousands they took as slaves... they, they were sacrificed... weren't they?"

Keith nodded sadly, surprising himself by reaching over and grasping her hand across the table. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of such tidings, but yes, they probably were. We talked to a few other slaves who told us about the doom ships that came and carted the slaves off to someplace where they were sacrificed, and some others who had seen an exhibition of the event from a distance. Many of them knew they were the last survivors of their home planets and had just... given up."

Ignoring how Coran had stiffened at the newcomer's act of kindness, Allura breathed in deeply then squeezed his hands back before pulling her hands back gently. "I, I was a young child when they invaded. I know intellectually there was nothing I could do, but the knowledge of what happened to all my people taken away is horrifying and painful." She then nodded abruptly. "Alright, I'm ready for the rest."

Keith went on to describe how he had been shown an image of the red Lion, noticing but not commenting on how his listeners had all stiffened at that, then going on to explain their mission. He watched as Allura's eyes, whose expressiveness was frankly startling, start to burn an electric blue with her anger. The other two locals he hadn't been introduced to also looked angry, but Coran simply looked appalled, or perhaps disbelieving.

"I did say we had decided not to follow those orders before we even arrived

here..." Kieth finished hesitantly, wondering if they were going to have to fight their way out of the cavern complex.

"I realize that, but you didn't say why." Allura said simply, leaning back and reining in her anger with visible difficulty. The hand on her shoulder from Coran didn't seem to help at all, Keith was amused to see, though how her eyes shifted with her emotions was frankly incredible to watch.

Looking back at his crew, Keith received nods from them all, though lance simply waved his hand instead of nodding. It was evident the ace pilot's head was still bothering him. "None of us were happy with those orders from the get-go. All of us realized right off the bat that this was a mission the GDF would never publicly condone. We would be cut adrift, disavowed. On the other end of the spectrum once we found out how the robeasts were being made, we all realized we needed to do anything we could to combat that. That meant looking for Voltron."

Sven spoke up for the first time, holding up a hand. "And we don't trust the GDF to really use Voltron or it's technology appropriately."

Looking at them all one after another Allura looked over at her advisors but before she could speak, Coran did. "I realize that it might seem reprehensible, but perhaps, if we could be guaranteed aid in getting back on our feet..."

"You wouldn't be sir," Hunk said quickly, before anyone else could, even Allura whose eyes had darkened into an oceanic blue that sort of scared Keith for a moment. "Arus is too far from GA space, no ship could make that distance in less than seven jumps and there's no way the Drule couldn't interdict the route. Besides, the GA is great at making promises, not so good at keeping them. My own planet was colonized by people gene-modded to live there with the assumption that we would be getting a lot of governmental aid. Instead the first few generations were treated like serfs until the planet 'paid off its debt'." Hunk's voice was matter-of-fact not angry, since that had happened well before he had been born, but there was still some bad feeling towards the GA because of that.

"And I for one would never agree to hand over the lions, the symbol of our cultural identity, to any foreign power," Allura snapped, causing Coran to turn to her with a frown. "This is not up for debate Coran. The Blue Lion will remain in Arusian hands, in my hands."

"Your highness..." Coran began but was interrupted by Keith gently tapping the table.

Once everyone's attention was on him, Keith smiled. "Good," he said simply. "You say you're the paladin of the Blue Lion, that means hopefully you can tell us what

we need to know to find the others." His lips twitched into a scowl. "We'll leave somehow retrieving the Red Lion for last, but before we get to making plans for the future I had a question: the Blue and red are both designed to look like female lions, or they would if they were designed to look like the Earth variety of the animal anyway. Is the black lion a male version of the species?"

"Yes!" Allura said, looking at him in surprise and something approaching hope in her eyes. "At least that is the way it is designed. My ancestors have long wondered why the lions were designed to look the way they do, but I can tell you that my father said the black lion was a more masculine personality almost? I know the blue is a female, but I would be at a loss as to how to explain that to anyone else."

Nodding, Keith fell silent. *So that image I had after my beating could have been the black lion? But why did I see it? How much of the lions are based on magic and how much on science?*

Coran stiffened at Allura's answer his hands clenching at his side. "You are not the blue paladin princess! You have a duty to act as princess of this planet, not like a common soldier!"

"There was never anything common about the paladins!" Allura snapped back. "And as I have said time and time again, princess of what!? We have barely found a bare thousand people alive across half the planet willing to even talk to us Coran! Our nation, our people are gone. We have to start over, not attempt to build from a ruined foundation!"

"And her being a princess certainly wouldn't matter to good republican boys like us," Keith quipped, bringing their attention back to him again with a jolt. Allura smiled at him while Coran looked even more outraged than before but Keith went on unhurriedly. "Her being the blue Paladin does. I am uncertain how this is even up for debate given how the Blue seemed to dance to her voice like it did. To us what you can do is far more important than what you were born as."

The others nodded, and Allura decided right then and there that she liked these five. She had actually been amused and interested in them, in particular their commander, from the instant he let her go. But now that he had said that, well they had just won a friend in her.

Keith went on quickly. "However, now you need to make a decision in your capacity as head of the government here, no matter how limited. Do you accept our reasoning for not continuing with our mission and do you accept us into your service? I warn you it will be provisional. From what I can see none of you have military training, so I would be very leery of following your orders in a combat setting."

Thankfully his earlier comment on accepting her as a paladin had mellowed Allura, and she didn't immediately blow up at him. Coran scowled, but didn't say anything while the other two locals simply nodded, waiting for Allura or the older man to speak. She looked at Keith and the others closely, frowning in thought.

They have been upfront about everything that's true, and I have to admit that I like the commander's attitude. The others too have impressed me, and if what I overheard as we traveled back from the ambush sight is accurate they could be a big help, not just in possibly finding the other lions or defending my people but in making their lives better. Yet it's obvious to see that their loyalty is primarily to each other, not to me or my people. Am I willing to assume their loyalty to me, to my surviving people will grow to match their personal attachments? And further, that we will continue to be able to work united as one going into the future?

After a moment she nodded, answering her own mental question. After all, what did she have to lose that she and her people had not already lost. *Better a hope for the future than a certain decline into nothing.* "I accept you and your command into my service provisionally, as you put it. I will be watching commander, don't think I will just forget your original mission. Still, what did you mean by that last sentence?"

"Allura, I have five years of training as a tactician and strategist as a soldier under my belt, and months of combat both singly and in groups to call on. I think you personally need martial arts training for one thing. You're massively strong, but it's evident you don't know how to really use it. You have, um some tricks I'll admit, but not enough to overcome the lack of training. In contrast, you are the resident expert on the lions. So we could train lessons there I suppose?" Keith said.

Allura found herself actually giggling at the look of almost whimsical humor in Keith's black eyes. *My word they are expressive aren't they?* "An even trade if I ever heard one commander," she said mock-sententiously before becoming serious. "Yet you mentioned the black lion, why?"

"I think I had a vision of it," Keith replied with a shrug, to the shock of his friends. "If I hadn't seen Hagar's magic in person when she was lightly torturing me I wouldn't believe it was real. But since I did, and saw you order around the Blue with a few gestures, it might be real. Something to look into, since I think our first objective should be to find the other lions if we can."

That no one questioned and Keith went on. A discussion on the chain of command could wait, he decided, though he really did not like what he was seeing among the locals, they had to talk other long term goals now. "In the long term, discovering as much as we can about the Drule and their robeast 'construction' is a

necessity. We also might want to think about somehow becoming mobile. I fully realize the need to defend your people, but it might be better to evacuate Arus rather than stay here.

This statement drew a sharp intake of breath from Coran, but the other three locals seemed more resigned to that idea. "That will take a lot of planning and resources though. So for now, why don't you tell us what you can about the lions Allura?"

End Chapter

A little abrupt there at the end I know, but I couldn't really figure out a better way to end the first chapter. After all, this is just supposed to be a teaser chapter, not a major story.