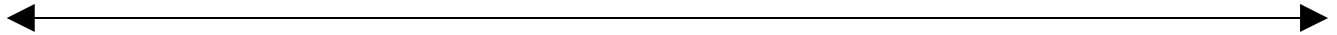


Part Two: BATTLE



Eleven: Begin!!

In the vacuum of space, the Denebian Galaxy swirled about an invisible axis. For eons, its regions were unknown. The worlds that spun within its celestial helix displayed each other to their respective children via the night sky, spawning the fantasy of touching those distant realms within their minds. Long ago, this dream had been realized and had long lost its fantastic appeal. Traveling between star systems and even some galaxies had become a mundane task, no more than an advanced concept of the 20th century ACE highway. This highway had been used by the encroaching mass of starships for weeks, destined to reinspire awe in the Denebian denizens.

The ships sailed quietly towards the destination, sound an impossible phenomenon in the void they traversed in. While there was some variation in the ships' designs based on their military purpose, they all bore a sleekness that contrasted with the bulky Alliance ships. Rather than being amalgamations of soldered metal stripped from the ground, they were polymers of organic concoctions created through Apodian technology and techniques. The compounds were discovered on the homeworld and developed to withstand its immense gravity. Implementation in interstellar vehicles yielded a versatile transport that lacked the inherent weakness of its hapless adversaries.

Lotor stood beside his father in the command ship. The vessel had no glass windows to compromise its integrity. A plasma screen incorporated into the ship's structure provided his eyes with a view of the exterior cosmos. A fleeting moment of nostalgia permeated his chest. He had been eagerly anticipating this day, to fight again. He was going to make history, and bring the Alliance to its knees.

Ah, I see you have your father's bloodlust... Shai's voice echoed in his mind. He squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced.

Zarkon, who looked down at her with an arching eyebrow, perceived Shai's slight grin. She detected his curiosity and looked up at him in return, cocking her head a trifle to the right, her eyes glancing in that direction for added effect. Zarkon's resulting frown underscored the anger he was feeling.

Shai, I know you are probably pointing your psychic tuning fork at my brain waves, so hear this: no flirting with Lotor.

It was Shai's turn to display a furrowed brow. She flashed a smile that shined with playful sensuality. *I do not covet caviar when I have already caught a shark.* Zarkon cleared his throat, prompting Jepaya at Shai's left to sport a smirk of her own. Her comrade, Ecchai, witnessed the display, but under the rules of military etiquette did not call attention to it.

A three-dimensional holographic image sprang out from the plasma screen of the Chief Navigator. Her opal scaled looked flat and matte in the graphical representation. "Great Meteriarch, we are being hailed by the savages," she announced. The term 'savages' was used in military terminology to address the enemy. This subtle suggestion that their opponents were inferior to them provided a means of initiative. There was no excuse for defeat if one's foes were hopelessly primal. Shai nodded at the hologram, which dissipated into horizontal green rays before fading away. "Enhance view," she commanded. The plasma screen's imagery zoomed in on the ships that were the source of the call.

"Rather blocky, aren't they?" Jepaya remarked aloud. She leaned over slightly and glared at Zarkon. "You called Shai to handle this?!" Without turning, she gestured to the screen's visual contents. "Are these tin cans too troublesome for the mighty Zarkon?" she sneered.

Shai rolled her eyes as Zarkon retorted, “Well, if I ever need a pilot against clunky, old Voltron, I know who to turn to. I do hope you wrote out your will before you left Apodia.”

Lotor covered his mouth to hide his smile. He had never seen anyone with the courage to deride his father as Jepaya did. Though he could not understand their insults, the visible agitation was universal. Though their public bickering was rare, he had been privy to enough private arguments that he could use as ammunition against his father for a lifetime if he was ever desperate enough to need it. *Even old folks can fight like little kids. Dare I think it, it's almost cute,* Lotor mused as the two orators were now silent as they held a staring match.

Shai held her hand up. “Enough of this!” Her eyes blazed a blue hue. Jepaya and Zarkon turned their backs to each other, a chorded “Hmmp” shared between them. Zarkon crossed his arms as he cast a sideways glance towards his son. Lotor had regained his composure by this time. He shrugged at his father, his muscular shoulders pushing against the fabric. The gesture was accompanied with an emotionless visage. Lotor was not sure why his father allowed Jepaya impunity, but he knew there was none left to spare for him. Zarkon sniffed, and with a curt nod, concluded his survey of Lotor.

I'm sure he found that quite amusing, but at least he's bright enough to feign respect, Zarkon surmised. He pursed his lips as he studied the plasma screen, his mind dizzy with brooding. *No, Shai's spell is effective. He is loyal now.* His eyelids narrowed as he observed the language scrawled on the Denubian ships. *They are Alliance ships,* he discerned. “They are a patrolling unit, Shai,” Zarkon announced. “The trajectory we are using to get to Dhm places us solely in the Crimson Quadrant. The next ships we encounter will be around my world.” *What if he's acting? What if he's biding his time, waiting for me to lower my guard?* his wary mind still prodded.

“If we answer their hail, they may relay communications to a main force. No sense in making this more cumbersome, is there?” Shai suggested. She closed her eyes as her body stretched and hardened into a Sapientydan shape. Her levitating cape and beads still remained about her altered frame, denoting her exquisite control; the organic cloth she had been wearing was now part of her. Lotor fell back, startled by the unexpected metamorphosis. He instinctively placed a leg back to keep from falling down, though it was enough of a response to garner a frown from his father.

Dammit! He's making me look like a complete fool! Not now, Lotor, please, not now. At least wait until it's just us again before you start these bad habits of yours anew, Zarkon indirectly prayed to a deity he knew did not exist.

“What shall we do?” Shai opened her eyes and met Zarkon’s. The pair was now the same height. A glimmer shared between them hinted at an exchange. Zarkon’s lips curled into a fiendish smile. Shai thrust her index finger at the plasma screen. “Attack!” she ordered.

Less than a second passed before the two battle cruisers flanking the command ship each launched a wide gravity beam at the line of Alliance ships. The beams dragged the ships to them, twisting and squeezing the metallic hulls into worthless debris. Instead of huge explosions that signify an attack, the Alliance ships imploded into small metal orbs that released electromagnetic waves in all directions. Ships in front of the battle cruisers had special apparati that attracted the waves to them and stored them in special energy banks.

Lotor assumed a thoughtful stance as he pressed a finger to his lip. “That was strangely unsatisfying,” he muttered.

“Sometimes it is better to forsake the flashy moves for a lethal stealth attack,” Shai advised.

Thank you, I've been trying to tell him that for years now, Zarkon cheered silently. His external demeanor was stoic as he stated, "The Alliance has noted a lack of activity as of late. If my sources are correct, an entire patrolling unit off the radar and not reporting at the end of their shift may elicit some minor response, since no one knows we're here yet... well, alive and knowing, anyway. Nothing to worry about. We'll be out of this area by then."

"Heh, they may even whine for Voltron to dust off his shoes and comb the area," Lotor added, his mouth churning a cruel smile. "Too bad no one can contact him."

"Yes, it is quite a shame," Zarkon agreed. "By the the time Voltron figures out what is happening, the battle will be won, and the Denubian will be in a state of panic. But do not worry, Lotor," Zarkon assured his child, "you'll have plenty of blood left to bathe your blade."

"And Allura?" Lotor pursued.

Zarkon smiled gently, deliberately testing his son. "If you are patient, you'll have her soon enough."

"Ah, what a perfect afternoon for some tea." Coran held the teacup to his lips, sampling the delicious flavor with a distinguished elegance that hinted at his privileged upbringing. He sipped without making a sound, and settled the cup onto its saucer. A gentle breeze swished the hairs of his moustache. It tickled him, and he wrinkled his nose in response. The view of the countryside afforded by the balcony he leisured on was idyllic. He could hear the songs of birds in nearby trees. He had found himself repeating this tranquil ritual more often since Allura had left. Perhaps it was his attempt to try to calm his restless soul. He had come to regard her as a surrogate daughter more than a

ward, and he worried about her in the same way a father would. To say such a thing aloud would not be meet, but it did not dismiss his paternal affections. Each day, a part of him eagerly waited for a call from the Voltron Force, from Allura, while he sipped his tea and listened to the avian melodies. Those calls had become less frequent in the past couple of weeks.

Do I matter that little? he thought to himself. *You must accept the fact that she is becoming an adult and does not need your constant supervision. If she needs help, you'll be there to aid her, but you have to understand that she does not want you peering over her shoulder every minute of every day.* He scratched his chin as he struggled with the notion.

A plate of danishes was placed before him. He looked up and smiled at the sweet girl who had brought them. She was the newest of Nanny's hires, and the most lighthearted with the hearty woman's loud demands. She reminded him of Allura, and since she had set off to retrieve the missing CFO of Seer, this maid often brightened his lonely days with a simple innocent grin. "Mmm, thanks, Ana," he replied as he inhaled the sweet smell emanating from the dish.

She held a hand to her mouth as she giggled. Her eyes closed while she chuckled, her brown hair bouncing lightly in its bun. "Nanny doesn't know I took them yet." She gave Coran a wink as she pointed to the sky. She placed her other hand on her hip as she leaned on the table. "But, I'll just say the mice took them. I don't think she'll want them after that."

Coran shook his head, though he found the mischievous act done for him charming. "You could get in trouble."

"If I get caught, I'll just get double duty," Ana replied with an unaffected shrug. She gestured to the empty chair across from him. "May I? I'm on my break."

“Of course,” Coran nodded. Ana sat down, dragging the chair closer to the table. Her posture was straight, her hands neatly folded in front of her. “Thank you, sir,” she obliged politely. She regarded him idly for a couple of moments as he helped himself to one of the treats she had brought. She licked her lips innately as she stared at the remaining pieces.

It was impossible to ignore her look. “Please help yourself to one. I doubt I can eat these all myself anyway,” he offered. She nodded, and gingerly lifted the smallest one. She slowly brought it to her lips, hesitating for a moment. Coran chewed his piece slowly, inexplicably transfixed on her slow attempt. She looked at him, and her own eyes widened, as if from fear. Without further delay, she tossed a piece of her danish in her mouth and chewed it twice before audibly gulping it down. She smiled at him uneasily. “Delicious,” she determined with a weak crease of her lips.

Coran frowned. “Do I make you uncomfortable?” he asked honestly. “Please do not misunderstand my manners...”

Ana’s face paled for a moment. “I know...I know it’s nothing like that!” she stammered, her fingers writhing uneasily in her palms. She looked down at her mass of digits as she bit her lip. “I never tasted one of those before. I was afraid if I admitted it out loud...you would think I was weird.” Her cheeks began to flush a bright sanguine.

“After the many terrors your generation has had to live through on this world, you are not weird for not having had one before. I assure you, most Arusian girls your age have yet to try one,” Coran reasoned in a calm yet preaching tone. Ana lifted her gaze and bobbed her head in accord with his explanation. She grinned broadly. She pushed the chair back and stood up. She walked over to the balcony, resting her elbows on the railing. Leaning forward, she asked, “When is Her Highness returning?”

Coran was not expecting the question at all. “Her Highness?” he repeated, flustered.

The young maiden twirled around. She placed her full weight on the railing. “It has been awhile. Nanny talks all the time about how we haven’t gotten much word from them. She jumps to all these conclusions. Some of them are just plain silly.” Gripping the railing with her arms twisted, she leaned forward. Her triceps flexed noticeably at the position. “Like the one about Keith and Her Highness eloping...”

Coran was now the one to leave his seat. He bolted up from it as though he had been stung on his buttocks by a bee, a look of fear deepening the wrinkles on his face.

“But I argued with her,” Ana continued, undaunted by his actions. “Seriously, I said, ‘Now Nanny, Princess Allura is a mature, responsible young woman and Keith is a loyal commander. Nothing illicit like that could ever happen. You worry too much.’ Then she gave me dish duty for a week,” she ended with a sigh. She looked at Coran. “So, HAVE you gotten word from Voltron?”

His face suggested he did not hear her inquiry. *I have seen the way those two look at each other. I have tried to turn the other cheek, but if even Nanny sees it, this situation can be potentially difficult if not handled soon.*

Ana walked up to Coran and waved her hand in front of his eyes. “Are you okay? Was it something I said?”

As she tried to figure out exactly how to rouse Coran from his shock-induced daydream, a Castle guard sporting green stripes ran up to them. He stood straight and quickly saluted. “Coran, sir, Prince Bandor of Pollux is contacting us. He has an urgent message from Galaxy Garrison. Your presence is needed in the Control Room.” The harbinger was the antidote needed for Coran’s paralysis. He nodded to the guard. As he went with the guard, Coran said to Ana, “You can finish them.”

Ana watched the Royal Advisor walk away. She bit her lower lip as she studied the dessert subtly tempting her. It only took her a moment to decide what she should do: she

grabbed two. Clenching one in her jaws, she stuffed the other in her apron pocket as she followed the two men.

She thought she had not been that far behind them, yet she found by the time she caught up that Coran had already been talking with Prince Bandor, whose young face filled the gigantic screen. She remained in the corridor rather than go in. If Nanny caught her snooping like this, a double shift would be the least of her problems.

“A patrolling force simply disappeared at the boundary of the Crimson Quadrant?” Coran summarized.

“Yup,” Bandor’s squeaky voice confirmed. It hinted that the onset of puberty was close. “I just received the word myself. There were no explosions detected or anything like that. None of the ships stationed at the Galaxy frontier border returned after their shift was complete. You haven’t gotten any distress signals, have you?”

Coran shook his head. “Not a thing. Are they on the radar?”

“According to the Quadrant’s envoy, there’s nothing at all.” Bandor’s informal use of words heightened the oddity of the circumstances. “If it was a magnetic cloud blocking their signals or something, our satellites would detect it. But there’s nothing!”

“It is something worth investigating,” Coran concurred. His instinct, conditioned after years of imminent danger surrounding him, came alive. His inborn intuition could not be swayed; he knew something was happening. Something bad, something the Voltron Force should at least know about, though they were too far to do anything immediate.

“Okay, Coran. “Signing off,” Bandor complied. He may be an adolescent, but the authority of a monarch could be seen in his demeanor and his eyes. Rather than shirk the weight off his shoulders like a burden, he used his royal birthright to protect his people from any harm. The screen went dark as the connection was terminated. Coran

immediately started pressing the buttons on the control panel with a dexterous rhythm. The buttons glowed pink and yellow as he pressed down on them, the lights casting shades on his face. The result of his input was a series of commands lighting up the Control Room's screen. It ended with a connection time out.

“What? What is this?” Coran blurted out. He tried reentering everything. It all yielded the same failure to connect with the Voltron Force. Coran punched the console with his fist, his whole body shaking. Ana emerged from her hiding place. She entered the Control Room, intrigued by the screen's futile command lines.

Coran was breathing heavily. He was not sure when Ana had first stood beside him. He only noticed her after he absently glanced down and saw her feet. She looked at him, a worried look on her face as well. “What's wrong?”

He pulled his eyes away. “I can't contact Voltron.” He gazed upward at the screen's apex. His vision began to blur from the stress of the situation. The skin of his face pulled his mouth down in a tortured frown.

Twelve: The Testy Troubadour

If this trip to Arus was non-stop, I would've killed myself by now, Lance grumbled to himself as he tried to ignore the singing Saoche chirp ancient songs deliberately off-key.

“I want the money, ding-ding ding, dit-dit ding-ding ding-DING, that’s what I want,” she chorused while striking a pose akin to a twentieth century disco dancer. She flapped into the air and freefallen into Lance’s lap as she medlied, “Get a good job with more pay and you’re ooookay!”

Lance pretended not to see her. He tried not to hear her as he stared into the space surrounding his Red Lion. He swore he heard it groan in pain several times during the past week of travel. The last time the team rested while the Lions recharged, he dreamed they formed Voltron and used the Blazing Sword like a baseball bat and hit Saoche out of the Universe. Then the dream somehow ended in a strip joint, but sadly he could not remember any details about that part.

“ ‘Cause we are liii-ving in a Material world, and I am a Material Girl, you know that we are...”

“Lance, can you please ask Saoche to stop,” Pidge’s voice whined in the cockpit. “Or at the very least, shut off your speakers so we can spare our ears.”

“No way, Pidge. If no one was willing to do the rotation I suggested, then everybody gets to suffer,” Lance returned the pleading with his typical cynical tone.

“That’s right, you tell him, Lance! Everybody gets to suff...hey, don’t be mean!” Saoche pouted.

“I think your serenading is lovely, Saoche,” Allura replied with a smile. *She has a crush on him, it’s so sweet!* she thought.

The feathers on the side of Saoche’s face fluffed out as her skin flushed beneath them to indicate embarrassment. “I wasn’t serenading anybody,” she announced as she held her wings akimbo.

“Yeah, she was torturing me,” Lance spat.

Saoche narrowed her gray eyes at him. Her eyes filled with tears as her lower jaw quivered. “If you’re gonna be a dick like that,” she began before turning away from him, “I’ll just sit over in the corner and not say another word.” She leapt to the floor and landed in the corner. Lance watched her, wide-eyed from disbelief. “If there’s a funny smell after a while, just assume I died,” she snarled as she faced the wall.

“Fine, thank you,” Lance sighed with relief evident on his face. He turned his attention towards piloting.

Hunk listened to everything with a broad smile on his face. *I have to agree with Allura on this one. That little parakeet is one heck of an admirer!* His eyes took on a haze as he thought about his own little crush back on Arus. The first time he saw her, he knew she was something special. *Okay, so the first time I saw her she was arguing with Nanny...* he thought happily.

“Mmmm, Ana,” Hunk whispered aloud.

“Did you say something, Hunk?” Keith asked on the intercom.

“Uhhh, nope, Keith,” Hunk shrugged as he dismissed the question.

“It was probably just his stomach grumbling,” Pidge joked. *I heard her name. The big guy can't wait to get back to see Ana!* His face took on a calm, mature demeanor. *It's about time. He hasn't felt anything for anyone since Twyla. And Ana seems like a cool girl. Heh, anybody who loves to annoy Nanny is fine by me!* Pidge pondered with a toothy grin.

Hunk recognized the quip was an attempt to dissuade any conversation about the name he had uttered. *Thanks, little buddy,* Hunk silently praised Pidge. He had not let anybody else know of his feelings for the new servant. Actually, he had not intended for Pidge to find out either, but he bumped into Hunk with a blush on his face as Ana was waving goodbye to go on her shift. Hunk hated the fact that he was so shy, because his large exterior suggested a persona that was imposing and aggressive. As Saoche had remarked to him during a stop, “You are just one big teddy bear.”

If that little thing can pick that up from me after only a couple of meetings, does everybody else who knows me well think that? Does Ana think I'm a big teddy bear? Hunk seriously wondered.

Keith punched the buttons on the console. “Hey, team, I'm gonna contact Coran and tell him we'll be there in seven days' time.”

“Great!” Pidge beamed.

“He must be wondering how we are. I'm surprised we haven't heard anything from him,” Allura chimed.

Keith was waiting for the connection to finish, but instead of seeing Coran's aged face on the screen, he received a printed message. “What? Connection timed out?” Keith said aloud in confusion.

“Connection timed out?” Hunk reiterated as his daydream ended. “What the heck does that mean?”

“We can’t connect with the Control Room, that’s what it means,” Pidge advised.

“Maybe Coran spilled something and fried the circuits?” Lance suggested.

“Maybe it’s not Coran who screwed something up, Lance,” Saoche shouted out from the corner.

“Nobody asked you, Polly,” Lance snarled.

“Lance! Don’t be cruel,” Allura admonished him with a shaking finger.

“Yeah, I offered you stereo sound, and you pretty much kicked me into the corner,” Saoche added.

“You volunteered for that, I didn’t kick you...” Lance argued.

“The point is,” Saoche interrupted him, “is that maybe it’s Voltron. Or this area you’re flying in.”

“That’s definitely possible,” Keith concurred.

“Try calling somebody else,” Pidge suggested.

“I’ll try Bandor,” Keith offered. He repeated the procedure, and found that he could not contact Pollux. He sighed from exasperation. “Pidge, you try to contact Pollux.”

“You got it,” Pidge accepted the challenge. However, after several attempts, he was also unsuccessful. “We should find somewhere to stop so Hunk and I can find the problem and fix it. A week without contacting Arus would send Coran into a fit...and I don’t even want to think what Nanny will mutate into,” he worried with a shiver sliding down his spine.

“Good,” Saoche nodded. “I’m not staying in this schmuck’s company any longer than I have to,” she determined as she pointed at Lance’s nose. “Allura, you stood up for me...can I ride with you? Please?” she begged, falling to her nonavian knees and cupping her hands in a praying position.

Allura felt sorry for her. “Of course you can,” she answered. “For the rest of the trip, it’ll be just us girls,” she added with a tiny laugh.

“At least **SOME**BODY knows how to treat a lady,” Saoche observed as she glared at Lance. “And since you’re so nice and polite, Allura, I won’t sing the rest of the trip, and it’s **ONLY** because of you.” She flapped onto Lance’s shoulder and slapped him hard on the cheek with her wing. “Thank your princess, you ungrateful swine.”

“Thank you,” he growled.

“Hah,” Saoche declared triumphantly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be over in the corner packing my things,” she joked with snobbish intensity. She flew to the corner, and scratched her talons against the metal wall. The screeching was intense, and the feedback generated from the speaker effectively blew it out. Lance cringed from the auditory attack, sure that his ears were bleeding.

“Oh, would you look at that, your speaker blew,” Saoche observed. “That means you’re the only one who can hear me,” she warned him with a fiendish smile.

“You said that you wouldn’t sing anymore!” Lance shouted.

“I promised Allura that she wouldn’t hear me sing anymore...but since no one else can hear us now...” she cracked her knuckles as Lance began to visibly sweat.

“...you get an exclusive performance.”

Thirteen: The Battle for Dhm

“Sempuzali!!!!”

Karna’s magic spell echoed through the air, warning any Dhms in the area to immediately disperse. Most had come to understand the nature of his abilities, and knew their meager weapons were pointless to help someone of his prowess. He held his hand up to the sky, his body glowing violet to announce an attack was moments away from execution. The Alliance’s 27th Infantry Unit did not run away fast enough, for a heavy gust spun around the entire group of soldiers, forming an impenetrable column of winds. Karna heard some shots fired from within the funnel as he maintained his position, and knew that some foolish soldiers tried to shoot a hole through the barrier.

Little do they know that the shots will only ricochet and kill their own, he thought glumly.

Hagar began her spell, moving her fingers in an elegant rhythm. She chanted several inaudible phrases before ending with a loud cry of “Astrapi!” Huge bolts of lightning shot down from the stormy atmosphere above all of their heads and into Karna’s trap. Screams could be heard from within the windy prison as all of the captured were subjected to lethal electrocution. The witch cackled. *How I missed this!* she mused happily.

When no more cries were evident, Karna slowly lowered his arm. As the purple haze around him faded away, the winds he had summoned dissipated in innocuous breezes. He saw that the attacks were effective; not a single soldier survived the charring.

Hagar clapped her hands. “Very good, Karna. Your first time using that spell has wiped out fifty men. You make a mentor very...”

“Raskeiro!” Karna interrupted as he threw a blade of wind from his fingers. It flew past Hagar, who turned to see it pierce the chest of a soldier that was aiming at her head. The soldier wheezed out a tiny cry before collapsing, pushing the wind blade completely through. Karna sighed and finished the phrase for Hagar. “Proud?”

“Proud...and relieved,” Hagar admitted as she wiped her forehead on her tattered sleeve. She surveyed the battleground several yards ahead of them. Explosions and gunfire could be discerned. “Your people need your help.”

Karna nodded. “Ripee!” he commanded to the air, which sent him several hundreds of feet high. He cast Sempuzali around himself this time to prevent anything from harming him. Once he felt he was high enough for this to work, he cried out to his element, “Anaavay!” The dominant gas in the air became excited at the command, bursting into flames. They crashed down to the ground, setting the hundreds of Alliance’s forces afire. The bodies ran frantically, rolling on the ground to extinguish themselves while others panicked and simply ran about in thoughtless terror. The Dhmk they had been fighting jeered at them, but used the advantage given them to put the smoldering men out of their mortal misery.

The entire planet was the setting for thousands of similar battles on this day. The cries from its children were declarations of war, not of defeat, which raged forth towards their enemies with a ferocious battle chord erupting from their throats. As it is with any mob that rushes towards a military unit armed with projectiles, many perished from shots fired before they ever reached their targets. However, it is also always true that there are never enough fired before the throng overtakes them. The bloodthirsty cheers of the Dhmk drowned the screams of the Alliance soldiers out. Many bludgeoned the soft human bodies with their bare fists, the red blood sticking to their fingers with every additional punch.

“My dear friend, you are painted!” congratulated a beige male to a female. The more that splattered on one of the comrades, the more clout they received from their

fellows. After the Alliance soldiers' corpses were no longer recognizable, she gestured to several others and procured the firearms, continuing their search for victory.

Elsewhere, snipers used Dhmk homes. Nary an enemy soldier unit rushed through an avenue before half of them was dead by the end of the block. The surviving half was pelted with rocks, knives, and any objects the homes' occupants could find.

"Ahhhh!!" a young soldier shouted as he fired into one of the houses. His blasts smashed all of the windows into thousands of fragments. His shoulders bucked from the continuous force of his arsenal. When his magazine was empty, there was no sound suggesting anyone survived. He heard a rustle in the house as he readied his weapon with a new magazine. He aimed it.

A young Dhmk child came out. His eyes were wide, and his legs were short. His arms were relatively longer, and he approached the soldier in the manner of a gorilla's gait. The soldier recognized the child as not having gone through the pupae stage of development. The boy cocked his head and asked something in a fearful tone. The soldier thought it to mean, "Please don't kill me." He held his hand out in a gesture of good faith. The child took the hand eagerly, a large grin on his face.

"Come," the soldier said. As the soldier moved forward, the boy jumped onto his back, squeezing his throat with his powerful arms. The soldier panicked and began firing his gun wildly in front of him. Gradually, his arms tingled and grew numb. His legs gave way, and he fell down face first. The boy used his large hands to snap the soldier's neck and guarantee death. The boy stood up. "We children have strong arms to grip our mothers and fathers. I guess your babies don't." He took the loaded gun, dragging it in the ground. He whistled to Cossack, who emerged from an adjacent house. The boy knew he could not use the device personally because he was too small, but an adult could. Cossack allowed the boy to climb on his back and grip his torso as they hurried ahead to find a place worthy of another guerilla attack.

Reyk had not yet participated in the freedom fight yet. He remained in the humble shack, using his special sight to see how close the Alliance's ships were to the planet. He could see the thousands' worth of fighters and cruisers in his mind's eye. His eyes shot open, determination expressed in them. He stood up, and moved towards the hut's exit. *Shai, there is a huge amount of Alliance ships about to attack. I hope you get here when you said you would,* he thought in a message specifically aimed at alerting Shai's psychic mind. Reyk felt the breeze outside on his skin. It stank of burnt flesh and dried blood. It had been a long time since he last encountered such odor. He began to gag. *And people wonder why I hide myself away from the Universe,* he thought as he spat some bile that had risen into his throat from the disgust of it all.

He folded his arms. There was no flash of light to alert anyone something important was happening. Reyk did not scream from pain, or laugh evilly from some surge of power. The change was instantaneous. If someone had been watching, they would have seen Reyk the orange Dhmk, blink, and then regard Reyk the golden dragon.

His arms were still folded, but they now glistened with a priceless sheen. His eyes bore red irises set into his angular face. He roared his signal to Karna. Seconds later, the Ripee gust met his bright wings, pulling him into the sky to do battle. He manipulated his muscles to position his leathery appendages so that he could climb further up. Satisfied with the exercise, Reyk began to freefall, pressing his wings close to his scaled body to allow less drag. His target was a large group of Alliance tanks that were about to fire on a civilian mob. He opened his mouth and thrust out a series of fireballs that promptly eliminated any threat the tanks were once capable of carrying out. The mob cheered, calling out "Robeast! Robeast!" as he spread his wings to catch the currents and pull himself upwards.

Great, they think I'm a robeast. Terrific, Reyk grumbled. His mind's sight alerted him that the first wave of Alliance ships was entering the atmosphere of the planet. He

nodded to himself, preparing for his next strategy. He could see about twenty fighters surround him, obviously shooting to kill. As the laser blasts were discharged, Reyk shouted, "Slow!!" The fighters were suddenly contained in a time warp that effectively slowed everything inside it down...except Reyk. He flew away to a safe distance. "As you were," he stated plainly. The fighters' shots blew each other apart, now that the large target had simply disappeared. Reyk sniffed, smoke trailing out of his nostrils in gray wisps. *Despite the gratuitous waste of life, this brings back old memories, Reyk reminisced. So this is one of the trials of friendship and family: rationalizing things you would never do for yourself.* His eyes widened as a thick shadow huddled over him, glowing bright red as he readied a massive attack. He saw the projectiles screaming towards him from the countless fighter ships creating the sky's shroud. His hands glowed a hue as fierce as his optics. He roared with determination to his elements, "Firestorm!" Fiery blades sheared through the dark atmosphere, screeching like banshees mourning the dead. The slivers pierced through the metallic hulls of the crafts, hot enough to melt through the infrastructure and meld all the fancy silicon chips and devices into amorphous globs of airborne jetsam. Ships that were compromised but not given instantaneous destruction careened to DhM's surface in random frenzied paths, exploding on impact.

A large battleship survived the meteoric entourage despite the damage. Reyk gulped audibly as he witnessed his body being torn apart by enemy shrapnel in a vision. *I don't have time to time-warp something that big! I'm dead,* he resigned himself. *Good luck, Zarkon.*

Really, Reyk. No need to be such a drama queen.

Reyk opened his eyes as a gravity field crushed the huge ship into a tiny metal orb. He laughed with relief. He used his time-sight to see and hear Zarkon ask Shai, "What did he do to make you say that out loud? Something altruistic and redundantly noble, I will wager."

You even blurted that out loud, Shai? Where is your clairvoyant etiquette? Reyk teased her mentally.

On the command ship, Shai visibly pouted as she crossed her arms.

“No need to bicker now, Great Meteriarch Shai,” Zarkon addressed her formally as he flipped his right hand over and, with his palm, gestured to the annihilation their forces were now delivering. “Witness the battle ending before it’s even started. Had I known that Alliance technology would fold to your military like this, I would have contacted you years ago.”

“And swallow your pride? Dubious,” Jepaya muttered as she clicked her tongue.

“Great Meteriarch,” a Sapientydan lieutenant’s visage came upon the ship’s screen. “There is a flag ship and two envoy ships retreating.”

“Dispatch a fighter unit to trail them. See where they are attempting to flee. Once their allies are identified, eliminate all parties in question.”

“Indeed,” the officer acknowledged the command and ended the transmission.

“The whipped dog runs with its tail between its legs to Arus,” Lotor assumed with a pompous demeanor. He chuckled, his platinum blonde hairs jostled about his shoulders as he enjoyed his sense of humor.

“I do not doubt it,” Zarkon agreed, a rare occasion. “But, alas,” he raised his voice to mock a breathless tone while he shrugged for effect, “there is no giant robot to help this time.” He shook his head. “Such a shame for the Denubian bluebloods,” he feigned compassion. He then snickered, his chest heaving from the humor. “It looks like we blueskins are here to stay, whether they like it or not.”

Fourteen: Castle Dhm Rebuilt

“We’ve won,” Karna stated. His words came out a delicate whisper, like a phantasm he was afraid would all too soon disappear and reveal a different reality. He blinked his eyes a couple of times, praying to the Gods he was not fabricating the triumph. He opened his eyes, and glanced around him. The Dhmk civilians and some rather odd lizard-like beings were detaining any remaining Alliance soldiers that had not been slain. Unlike his homeworld’s reptilian subcultures and creatures, these sentries wore naught but some strands of beads and bore weapons bigger than he was. Their appearance and aid at this time could only mean one thing: A trump card from someone waiting to use it until it was needed most.

“We’ve WON!” Karna shouted to the skies filled with the massive alien ships. “Grandfather, we’ve WON!” he cried again, wholly convinced that his grandfather was within one of them. He doubted that he could be heard, but that did not alter his actions a wit. Soon many other Dhmk in the area reiterated Karna’s joyous announcement. Many also whooped and hollered, glee filling their bodies as the bloodlust from battle faded. Those that were not aiming guns at Alliance prisoners were grasping the wind currents with their hands.

Hagar was looking up at the sky, impressed beyond words. *These ships are magnificent! I envy the engineers,* she thought.

Perhaps I can discuss the specs with you after the celebration, a friendly voice from the past offered, echoing in Hagar’s mind.

Spell-sister, Shai! Hagar’s inner voice exclaimed. *So this is your doing! Ha-when you contacted me before, I was expecting some grand magical entrance, not a technological armada,* she goaded.

Do I detect some bitterness in my fellow spell-sister? Shai countered. A wave of amicable emotion surged through Hagar's body, as Shai's thought was one lacking any malicious connotation. *It has been decades since we have met in the flesh. I must rectify this now,* was the final message sent to Hagar before the telepathy between the two ceased.

Karna raced up to Hagar. "Well, is he up there?" he asked, sensing the remains of magical energy left. "I know you contacted someone. Is he? Is Grandfather up there? And Uncle?!" His enthusiasm was boundless, as his feet were not even touching the ground; he was levitating subconsciously from anticipation.

"Yes, they are, Karna," Reyk disclosed. Karna turned his head and saw that Reyk had resumed his orange Dhmk persona again.

"You make an incredible robeast," Karna complimented.

Reyk's forehead muscles furrowed as his eyes widened from the misnomer. He frowned. "Uh, that was a dragon. I'm a dragon. I'm glad I'm good at it, since that's my natural form. I thought you said you already knew that," he added with a hint of frustration at being mislabeled a robeast for the umpteenth time that day. He gently pushed on the top of Karna's head to put his feet back on the planet.

"I could see it through your aura, yes, but I did not know there was a special term for you. A generic large war creature is called a robeast in Dhmk," Karna explained. "I meant no disrespect."

Hagar's mouth crooked a smile as Reyk, dumbfounded, replied, "Oh." He coughed and sought to relinquish being the center of attention by gesturing to Shai's command ship. "She is going to be landing momentarily near the former Castle's runway strip." Since the Castle's occupation by Alliance troops, the runways were maintained for any aircraft used

by the Galaxy Alliance peacekeepers stationed on the planet. The runways were now bare, as every last airship had been reduced to steel orbs by the Sapientydan gravity beams.

The command ship descended, its landing tranquil on one's ears. The engines barely emanated any type of sound to suggest they functioned to the outside eye. Many Dhmk onlookers were temporarily scared as they thought the craft was crashing. However, it did not accelerate to the earth in an inferno – there was no smoke to suggest an anomaly. Fear turned to admiration as murmurs of awe swept the grounded spectators. After generations grew accustomed to the notion that all machines generate noise, and that the larger the machine, the more decibels that rang one's ears, this aberration of that theorem made the visitors almost unnatural, like deities. The vessel's landing was smooth from beginning to finish as projections developed on its exterior to support it in an idle position. The engines promptly ceased its tiny sounds of activity. The projections had merged in the front of the ship to create a large runway to the surface of Dhm.

Karna used the Ripee spell so that he was in front of everyone in an instant. He saw the curious faces of his people as they behind the curved and aesthetic behemoth before them. The anterior hulls made a slitting noise as they split apart. Karna cringed as it immediately reminded him of sinews being torn from a muscle. He saw figures emerge on the runway, which was now animated to resemble an escalator. His eyes refused to blink, though he began mumbling a spell in case it was needed after all. Then he saw them. His grandfather, alive! His uncle, as strong and virile as he had been when Karna had went into his cocoon, standing there before him as well. He was so caught up in his happiness that he did not even see Shai standing beside them. It was only when he suddenly felt the presence of her power that he was jostled into awareness. 'Her power is immense!' Karna thought as he sucked in his breath. She had taken on her usual form of a humanoid feline-type being, the traditional cloths to hiding the majority of her hybrid body once more, her cape floating above her shoulders. She felt his presence as well, and smiled gently.

As the Dhmk Royal Family became visible to the other spectators, a contagious spread of cheering erupted for miles. “Now it is all clear! King Zarkon has returned to us! Prince Lotor is alive! They have given us victory! Hail Our Majesty!” Random Dhmk were heard shouting.

Accolades and veneration coupled with epithets reached the father’s and son’s ears.

“You could never give this up, admit it,” Zarkon uttered to Lotor, who simply smiled back.

“Neither could you,” Lotor responded. “It is all in the family, I suppose.”

“M-hmm,” Zarkon agreed, not in the mood to attempt double-guessing his son’s motives.

Shai cast a sideways glance at the two men, and was delighted. Jepaya and Ecchai, who were a few feet in front, accompanied the trio. The entire company was flanked by dozens of Xandias soldiers. The runway rolled beneath their feet. Once the soldiers were deposited onto Dhmk soil, they formed a pair of parallel lines. All of the soldiers were off the runway before the quintet had their turn. As they passed through, the Sapientydan soldiers would raise their weaponry upright and protrude spikes from their shoulders that create an arching canopy for them. The Dhmk were ecstatic, their cries and actions a mere caliber away from being orgasmic.

Karna waited patiently, using the ample time to ready his thoughts and emotions. He loved his grandfather and uncle with a passion, but he knew better than to resort to childish displays of affection in front of them. At least while they were all in public; he was sure that when Yudishthira and Arjuna returned, the three of them would corner each one in private and hug them until they heard a smile crack. Karna heard a rustle behind

him, and he felt Hagar place a hand on his shoulder. He then heard her groan as he felt Cossack slap his other shoulder.

“Heh, wondered where you have been,” Karna teased him.

“Hey, I’m not gonna greet the King all bloodied up and stuff. First impressions are everything, so I took the time to wash up,” Cossack explained.

“Cossack, King Zarkon HAS met you before. You were assigned to the Triplets’ cocoons by him PERSONALLY, remember?” Hagar whispered fiercely. When all Cossack did was shrug in reply, Hagar aborted the argument and simply sighed. *I’ll zap a hole in his pants to match the one in his head later*, she compromised. By this time, Reyk had joined them in the foremost welcoming party, and chuckled to himself, adding to Hagar’s chagrin.

“Aww, Hagar, looking her most cheerful for His Majesty,” Cossack mocked. Hagar simply turned her head, regarded him indifferently for a couple of seconds, and then turned her head back. A moment of inaction passed before Hagar pummeled Cossack’s groin with the head of her staff. As Cossack sank while clutching his anatomy, Hagar melodically sang, “You missed a spot. Don’t worry, I think I took care of it.” A quiet whine trembled the warrior’s lips as he fell to the ground. The event was so quick and relatively silent among the cheers that no one even noticed.

Shai, Zarkon, and Lotor approached the last flanking soldier. Zarkon took a couple of steps forward. He surveyed his subjects to and fro, while they whistled, cried, and screamed epithets to him in this moment of triumph. He focused on the closest group to him. He cocked his head sideways as he scrutinized the cerulean Dhmk. Karna felt his grandfather’s eyes on him, and he met them with his. The king’s eyes held a coldness to them that faded away as warmth overcame them. A toothy grin spread on Zarkon’s face as he outstretched his arms. “Grandson Karna,” he addressed him, adding more to the fervent

adulation from his subjects. Karna approached his grandfather, a broad grin on his visage to showcase his mood.

I can't believe he can distinguish me! It's been so long, he pondered miraculously. He bowed to his grandfather, his King, His Majesty. "Greetings, Your Majesty. Welcome back to your realm." Zarkon nodded. "You may rise, Karna," he replied formally. Karna obeyed, and looked at his grandfather. Zarkon embraced him, sending a raucous ripple of indomitable elation throughout the crowd. Karna did not hesitate to return the affection. *Oh well, we'll still corner them anyway,* Karna revised his plan.

Zarkon and Karna released each other. Karna bowed to his uncle. "Greetings, Prince Lotor. I am your nephew, Karna."

"Karna?" Lotor repeated. "How you have grown!" he exclaimed with surprise, his good feelings authentic as he clapped a rising Karna on his shoulders. "I know that you had matured while I was away, but I did not know you would become such a fetching male specimen! I must be careful, lest you steal my title of Most Attractive Noble in the Galaxy," Lotor joked. Karna closed his eyes and politely smiled.

"Heh, if Karna keeps hanging around with you, Lotor will have NOTHING to worry about," Cossack snickered in Hagar's ear.

Shai, I KNOW that did not come from Lotor's brain, Zarkon thought angrily.

Was not me, Shai retorted truthfully.

Sure it wasn't.

Your sarcasm is limitless, her mind dryly sent out to Zarkon.

You know me, I live to give, he smugly shot back. Zarkon heard an “Ooo!” that brought his attention to the visual of a leering Hagar and a Cossack in pain. He snickered. *The old woman’s still got that mean streak.*

Shai smiled as she replied aloud, “Now be nice...” *Or I will have to give you a public spanking*, she concluded in a private thought to him.

Hah, now whose wit is boundless? Zarkon thought back to her, though his dark blood rushed to his cheeks and gave his face a swarthy blush.

“Karna, may I introduce to you the Great Meteriarch Shai Sayenne of the Xandias Clan,” Zarkon gestured. Karna nodded to Shai, and bowed elegantly. “I am honored to meet the ruler who has aided my family in reclaiming its rightful place, Great Meteriarch,” he stated.

Shai took a hold of Karna’s hands and lifted him upright. “The honor is all mine, I assure you,” she answered him in the Dhmk tongue.

Karna’s eyes widened. “You speak Dhmk?” he said in surprise. He then smiled nobly and nodded. “I am impressed with the Great Meteriarch’s knowledge of my people. Few Denubians can speak it as eloquently as you do.”

“I have had the luck of enlisting an impressive tutor,” she continued the conversation. Zarkon shot her a glare that suggested she not volunteer any further information without his consent. *Easy there, fella. You are not sitting on your throne just yet*, she toyed with him.

“My Goodness, Shai. You look absolutely breathtaking!” Hagar’s voice called to her.

“My Spell-sister? Is that you I hear?” Shai shouted out. Hagar hurried up to her, and then stopped several steps away.

What is wrong? Shai thought to her.

You have to ask? Do not pretend my deformation is slight, Hagar replied sadly. She gestured to her form. *You have tapped into the Elixir of Life, and here I am, caught in the spell trap of a Dhmk blood curse.*

I know how it feels to be judged by one's looks. You would be enlightened by how many find this hybrid semblance of mine quite disgusting and abominable, Shai alluded to her present state. She lifted Hagar's face in her hands and placed their foreheads together. A bright shimmer of white light surrounded their frames.

“Someone always said there's nothing like seeing two chicks together, and now I know they were right!” Cossack blurted out.

“They are spell-sisters,” Zarkon said suddenly from behind Cossack, who bolted from surprise. “And do not give them any ideas,” he added aloud while thinking morosely, *Because I know I'd be three in that equation and having Hagar there would just be...ugggh.* Zarkon shivered. He shook his head for a moment.

“Centuries pass, and you still have yet to change, Zarkon.”

Zarkon looked at the orange Dhmk. “I do not recall you...”

“And after all of these plans for revenge I helped set up for you. I finally decide to get involved with your political ‘career’, and this is how you repay me,” Reyk pretended to be hurt.

“Ah, Reyk,” Zarkon stated plainly. “What can I say, you are a master of disguise,” he gave up his unimpressed air with a nostalgic tone. “And, how do the remainder of the plans progress?”

“Exactly as planned.”

“Excellent,” Zarkon raised his fist to the sky. He did not see Hagar behind him.

“Hello, King Zarkon,” she replied in her default cackle. He turned around.

“Hello, Hagar,” he said.

“Mmm,” she nodded.

“Mmm,” he muttered as well. They continued to look at each other, but the tension created by their close presence stifled any emotion in their voices.

“You have taken care of my grandsons since my leave?” he asked.

“Yes. They are all quite well. Yudishthira and Arjuna will be back within days,” she announced.

“I...thank...you...” Zarkon forced the words out. *In Dhmk culture, a subject who protects the heirs to the throne from danger during wartime is granted an honorary status, a public thanking, and a private audience with the King...damn, Zarkon cursed to himself. This is why I hate making public appearances. Now I have to follow the whole custom through or lose face.*

Hagar’s face had an impish demeanor to it, as she was well aware of the custom. She folded her arms and waited patiently for what was due her. *Of course, since I love*

those three as much as if they were actually my own, I would forego the custom if he asked me to. Men will never understand a woman's nature. And as for Zarkon, well, he's even further off the mark. So, I'll just enjoy making him feel uncomfortable. He's so comically endearing when he gets like this, she thought amorously.

Cheers of "Old Mother" and "Hagar" pressed through the now thousands of spectators.

"At our audience, I shall bestow upon you...an honorary title," Zarkon grit out while managing to keep a smile on his face. "...Later."

"Duly noted, Your Majesty. The pleasure is all mine," she bowed.

I'll bet, Zarkon thought dryly.

Lotor witnessed the whole spectacle, chuckling and stifling guffaws in his throat while Karna did the same beside him.

"Aren't they simply adorable?" Shai elbowed Lotor in the chest.

I thought Shai and my father were an item... Lotor thought to himself. *She doesn't seem to care.*

I was told you knew nothing of monogamy, Lotor, Shai helped herself into his mind. *As for your father and I, we have a unique relationship that is most harmonious when polygamous.*

Lucky bastard, Lotor mused.

“I hate to be the one to interrupt this reunion, but I have a surprise for you, Zarkon,” Shai suddenly proclaimed. Zarkon turned around. Hagar nodded to Karna, who understood. Reyk stepped beside Shai. *Love your hair*, Shai joked at the lack he had thereof in Dhmk form.

Hah hah. Great to be back, though, Reyk took the opportunity to welcome her. *Hagar and Karna are ready for this*. By the time he had finished telepathically speaking, the two had joined them in a straight line. Zarkon took some steps back, not out of fear, but of instinct: a four-way spell was imminent, and he knew from prior experience it was best not to be too close.

Reyk began his time vision, seeing Castle Dhm as it was before it had been destroyed. Shai used her telepathy to send the vision to Hagar and Karna. Hagar channeled the spirits to aid in the undertaking, while Karna summoned the elements at his disposal to provide the materials. It seemed as if the planet itself came alive with the teleological outlook of reconstructing the ancient citadel. Chunks of metal and lazon flew from the abandoned mines and were burned, cut and shaped by the forces of Hagar and Karna. Their magic was guided by Reyk’s vision, using it as an explicit blueprint. Shai maintained the connection between their minds while starting another spell. She shapeshifted into her pure Felinis form and began to howl a chant. The resulting combination of hues and vocals from the four sorcerers created a mystical atmosphere that was incapable of disregarding or ignoring. It transfixed everyone who beheld it, even the King himself, chanting along with the foreign phrases and linguistics, their eyes glowing bright, their memories feeding into the spell. The planet seemed to glow with the power as bright as an Arusian noon sky. Shai’s spell also summoned the Apodian materials she had brought specifically for this purpose out from the various ships. These polymers danced around with the Dhmk ores with rhythmic grace in sync with the chorded chanting, forming one solid outline of the Castle Dhm. The electronics were growing into the infrastructure like hungry ivy, lighting the interiors as they went along. Even the tiny amenities involving cloth and living areas were created.

The spell was complete, and the glow that had consumed the area subsided. Spectators' eyes resumed their slit irises, and beheld the product with wonder and pride. Even Zarkon could not hide his pleasure, nor did he want to. It was almost an exact replica of Castle Dhm, except it was built stronger and more advanced. The Apodian ingredients made it indestructible, but due to its shrewd construction, no one could tell these extra things were added. He had discussed the various fallacies he had found with the Old Dynasty's design with Shai over the past couple of weeks, and how he would have changed things and corrected security issues. *But I had not been expecting this!* his inner child squealed.

Think he wants to jump up and down like a little kid? Shai pondered to Reyk.

Want to? Oh yeah. Will he? No. When I first found him, I had saved him from a Drule soldier's rifle held to his head. I had saved his life, and you know what he did? Nothing, not even saying thanks. I bet he wanted to jump up and down, but nope, I did not even get a thank you. I said, 'Want something to eat?' he goes 'Fine, whatever,' and that was that, Reyk reminisced to her.

This is why I never wanted to agree to that pact with you of not reading your mind without permission. You leave out all the intriguing stuff when you commune with me. And Zarkon's mind is so crowded at times, things like this are hit and miss, Shai's mental voice moaned.

He is so screwed up. An adopted son after my own heart, Reyk prided himself.

He carries MY family name, do not forget, Shai teased.

That is what I love about you Sapientydans. Having an intimate relationship with a stepson is totally acceptable in your society as long as his biological mother is dead, Reyk quipped.

Aw, you're just upset you are not my stepson, Shai warbled as she pinched his cheek.

The cheers began anew at the spectacle of the reformed Castle DhM. The Alliance prisoners were awestruck themselves. Some of them had even collapsed from the impact of such a development. They knew they would be fodder for robeasts and exhibition fighters during the victory celebrations.

Zarkon cheered to his people, the Dhmk, with all its sub races of natives and Duonulan like himself. "My people, let us rejoice at the eternal site of Castle DhM!" The soldiers flanking them began walking in accordance with Shai's speed. Zarkon posed to her in Sapientydan, "How are your troops on Planet Opachre doing?"

"Reestablishing your presence there now," she provided.

"And Tyrus?"

"By the end of celebration, it will be in your jurisdiction once again."

I know that little vow of ours is not your only motivation for this. And I know you think like me, so I can only feel some apprehension about what you want in return, Zarkon thought adamantly.

Nothing to compromise your integrity, Zarkon. I will let you know when it is appropriate. We do not think as alike as you have led yourself to believe. Now, for the sake of the Essentia, have some fun! Shai admonished him.

Zarkon's expression was one of shock. It was soon submerged beneath his familiar mask of apathy as he nodded. "Since I now can, I will."

As the royal family progressed into the castle, escorted by Shai's guards, Jepaya found herself walking at a slower and slower pace. She had kept herself silent, and saw no reason or incentive to act differently. *I will NOT follow HIM*, she thought to herself, and took several lingering moments adjusting her beads in the lower gravity's atmosphere. She then looked at the Sapientydan ships, and at the cascades of tiny natives heading for the castle.

"Are you are robeast?" She heard some odd chattering next to her. She saw a short blue creature resembling something midway between Zarkon and Lotor. He wore a yellow cloth, and had a helmet with horns protruding from its sides. She glared at him, narrowing her eyes.

"ARE...YOU...A...ROBEAST!" Cossack repeated slowly and much louder, pointing to her and then to some feral robeast that was snarling about the area now that much of the Dhmk were gone.

Jepaya was not amused. "You call me a dirt stomping monster of some sort?! You associate my superior race with that stupid thing?! How dare you!" She roared in her homeworld's tongue, not yet mastering the English Standard.

"Was it something I said?" Cossack mumbled.

A punch to his face that knocked him into the dirt answered his query in the affirmative. Jepaya was already yards away, as she briskly used her long strides to get to the Castle and guard Shai. Cossack readjusted his jaw as he picked himself up.

“Yup,” he answered his third, albeit silent, question, “That is definitely a chick.”

Fifteen: Turnabout

“You seem awfully quiet,” Allura observed. She spoke to her companion, the boisterous Saoche, who had taken on a somber personality since traveling with Allura instead of Lance. It had been a pleasant ride for her, unlike the horror Lance claimed to have been subjected to. Allura was almost certain that the avian’s feelings were hurt from the rejection. “Saoche, don’t be upset.”

Saoche sat beside her silent, staring at the stars shining into the cockpit.

The princess frowned. “Please don’t take what Lance said to heart.”

Saoche shifted her gaze. Her tone was dull and drowsy, bereft of energy. “That’s not why I’ve said little this past week.”

“Well, what is it then?”

The creature folded her hands and placed her chin on them. “I’ve just been waiting, that’s all.” She closed her gray eyes. Her melancholy was as unbearable to her as Saoche’s obnoxiousness was to Lance, Allura realized. “It won’t be long now, though.” Saoche fluffed out her feathers and ruffled them with a series of body shakes. “Ah, that released some tension.”

Allura smiled. “You certainly seem more upbeat!” She stroked her companion’s crest feathers, taking care to keep the quills neat and connected. “I find that it is always good to talk about something that is bothering me, even if my audience is a vase full of flowers,” she suggested.

Saoche blinked quickly. She opened her mouth to say something, but at the last moment chose to retract the statement before it could even be said. She rubbed the back of her plumed neck, which tingled underneath the thousands of soft feathers. *Okay, this is it. This is it*, she thought. She took a couple of long breaths. “I don’t feel like talking about stuff that’s irking me. I’m in the mood to sing a song or tell a story. How ‘bout it, Princess? Would you like to hear a story? One about Earth?”

Allura nodded. “Of course!”

Saoche cracked her knuckles as she began. “You know that all of the humans scattered all over the Universe came from Earth, right?” After hearing no reply, she continued, “Of course you do, no one’s stupid enough to believe that humanoid science fiction crap, ignoring evolution and probability and logic and shit...” Saoche turned her face to Allura, who had a blush on her face and an uneasy smile. “Oh...well, it’s okay...I mean, you’ve been living in a cave 90 percent of your life, you’ve had more pressing stuff to worry about.” Saoche pat Allura on the shoulder.

“Well, anyway, they did. But, something happened on Earth; colonies on planets were stranded, and many fled Earth and found new worlds as well. Two thousand some-odd years later, and none of them have any memory of that passed to them.” Saoche turned to her companion and gestured with a crook of her wiggling finger. Allura complied and inched her head forward. “But, I’ll let you know. Promise not to tell, ‘kay?”

Allura was intrigued. Her curiosity was peaked. She turned off her communicator to further the story. “Okay, only my ears will learn of this.”

“Earth’s been considered a dying planet for millions of years. Basically, the overall amount of biomass has been decreasing steadily. It’s a pretty violent place: earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, hurricanes, tornadoes, typhoons, monsoons, drought, el nino la nina, waterspouts, and tons of other crap not caused by a witch and her robeasts. Occasionally,

the oceans recede, then come out and flood, recede, sometimes shit freezes 80 % of the planet, then it melts and floods, get the picture? Not exactly a friendly place, is it?” Allura gulped. Saoche continued. “But, the stuff that did survive was damn good at it. And, a sort of interdependence really unprecedented anywhere known existed. The base of the ecosystems was bacteria and algae. But even with those tiny bastards, only 1% of all species that ever were on Earth survived. So, it was time for Vajel’s little test...”

“Vajel?” Allura repeated the name. “Who is that?”

Saoche smiled harshly. “The one who decided to kill off the base and see what would still stand.”

Allura’s face paled. Saoche laughed. She grabbed Allura’s face and whispered to it. “Humans, with their inherent creativity and odd sense of morality, tried to save the planet from collapse, and they almost succeeded by saving algae...but by then the annihilation of prokaryotes was complete and a Pryme was selected.” She released Allura’s face, and hopped over her head.

“Wha?” Allura was very confused. An apprehensive feeling was rising in her gut.

Saoche had extended her wings by then, and sailed lightly to the metal floor. “Too bad the Pryme was biased with human emotions, so Vajel sent a Passer to deal with it, and steal its Code for modification.” At this point, Saoche began to groan. She clutched her abdomen. Allura heard the sound and twisted her body in her chair. She sprang out to help.

“Well, humans still had a trump card, the pinnacle of their technology, a nanoborg, a silicon based organism that used computer science in ways that would make a technogeek of today cream in his pants.” Saoche’s face contorted with pain, and Allura

found herself wincing more from the explicit choice of words than from Saoche's sudden demeanor change.

“The Passer took it on and nearly destroyed it...but then the Pryme's Code went berserk and merged the two.” The feathers about her began to melt down to the floor like puddles of quicksilver. It was shiny and glimmered in the light. Allura screamed, but no one could hear her with the speakers off.

Saoche's voice became mournful. “But Vajel said the Passer had broken cardinal law: no Passer shall use technology...but it was part of the Passer; without it, the Passer would die. This dependence angered Vajel, but the fact that the Passer expressed desire to live with the affliction rather than perish sealed the Passer's fate. It and its descendants were cursed with eternal exile, and would carry the tainted nano legacy with them forever, replicating asexually, once a generation, until the end of time.” Saoche's feathers were now nonexistent; her eyes glared at Allura. Her frame began to extend upward, and the ooze followed it, become integrated into the shape. Her extremities grew very long and sleek, and her mouth and jaws fused with her skull into one ovoid shape.

Allura tried to rush for the console to press the speakers on, but an invisible force threw her back. “Uggh,” she groaned as she rubbed the back of her head. She saw that her helmet had been knocked off her head as well. *Telekinesis...and telepathy, toots*, a voice boomed in her head. She faced the long, extremely thin form of Saoche. “Why are you doing this?!”

What, don't you think I look cool? Saoche's elongated forearms still possessed digits, which had also expanded during the transformation. They tapped against her shiny chest which fell inward like flesh at the slight pressure. *You know, I can only do this at certain times in my life cycle, so you should really be honored...to tell ya the truth, I never thought that fish-skunk ever listened to my ancestors' ramblings, but this just goes to show*

ya, since this whole scheme was HIS idea. I guess spending a couple of months in a space pod gives one time to think.

“Fish-skunk? You aren’t making sense?! What...what about Xiron?! And why can’t Voltron signal anyone?”

Xiron’s another story. But the no signal thing? That’s been me the whole friggin’ time, Allura. I’ve been scrambling the frequencies with my own brain waves. That’s the cool thing about being quasi-nano: I don’t have to follow only the Laws of Life or only the Laws of Machines. I can pick and choose, like a buffet. A smorgasbord of loopholes to hop in and out of as I please. And who is this fish-skunk, you ask? Well, gee, who oh who could have concocted such a convoluted scheme of vengeance, I wonder? Saoche pat the top of Allura’s head, stroking the blond hair the way the princess had done to her crest minutes ago. She knocked on it like a door. I do believe I hear an echo. Since you’re so dense, I’ll give you another chance to guess who’s behind this, since I’ve been dying to see your reaction since Day One. Saoche thrust her fingers out in a branching arc. Okay, okay, BIG hint here...he murked your pops, and has an obsessed Smurf for a son... Saoched twirled her fingers in the air as though pulling the answer out from Allura’s lips.

Her look was of absolute terror. Her mouth was open wide, but her scream was trapped in her lungs. “They...they...?”

Ha ha ha, Saoche’s voice echoed in her psyche. Allura pushed herself away, scuttling on the floor. Although the wall greeted her back, her body still repeated the movement.

I really wish I could physically laugh right now..ahh, well, I’ll replay this scene for everyone on DhM later. It’ll be loads of laughs.

Allura shook her head violently as tears flowed down her cheeks. She began to sob.

Saoche took a single step, but her stride length had increased so dramatically that she was now casting a shadow over the traumatized woman. *I really like ya, kid, trust me, I do. I'm a nasty lil' bitch at times, but I can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Your choice. But no matter what choice you make, we are leaving for Dhm now. Get up...*

Allura's body lifted off the floor and floated towards the pilot seat.

Sit down...

Her body sat easily into the seat, though she was fighting it all the while.

And away we go!

The Blue Lion blasted away from the others.

"Allura!" Keith shouted.

"It's that damn bird, I know it!" Lance cursed. He lunged towards them, the Red Lion roaring with determination.

Since when the hell can a roar happen in space? Saoche's thought entered Allura's head absentmindedly. Allura rolled her eyes. I saw that...well, these peeps are fairly close to Arus, so I dunno if this is gonna work now...I tell ya, I can never predict this transforming crap right. So, Zarkon gets his cape in a bunch if they make it; let's see him pull an EMP out of his ass...

“An Electromagnetic Pulse?!” Allura screamed. “You’ll fry every circuit!! They’ll die!!”

Well, shit, Allura, that changes everything, Saoche mocked nonchalantly. She pulled her limbs close to her body. Her black orbs sank into the dark head. Allura sensed a tremendous force that passed through her body, but it quickly passed. The Blue Lion did not seem affected, but she saw the other Lions shut down. The lights in the cockpits were out, indicating the attack was successful.

A delayed EMP...I am so good, Saoche congratulated herself by shaking her own forearm as her eyes rose out from their hiding place. She smirked playfully. *But I’m getting ahead of myself, aren’t I?* Saoche pondered as her featureless face turned. *I feel like singing a song...*

“Father...Keith...please help me...” Allura pleaded.

Well, if YOU won’t grow a spine, I will happily give you one. The matter that constituted Saoche coagulated into tiny streams of gray fluid that cascaded onto Allura’s body. It filled every orifice on the woman’s face, and seeped into her soft skin’s pores. Saoche willed herself to consume Allura’s body, forming a gray shell around it. Saoche’s possession was complete when she opened the girl’s blue eyes and was able to see through them.

She glanced at the human hands, which were now gray from the symbiosis. She cleared her host’s throat and sang, “La la la laa...” The gentle voice of Allura sprang out and bounced off the walls of the cockpit. “Hee hee, I sound like such a priss,” Saoche giggled. “Well, no more dawdling for me. Time for me to pilot this beauty to Dhm. And the princess and Blue Lion, too,” she added as an aside. Using Allura’s arms and hands, she grabbed hold of the controls and skillfully powered the megathrusters to change course and head to Planet Dhm. She sighed. “I’m gonna be so tired when I change back. This

whole ordeal has been one helluva ride. Whew!“ She continued to speak aloud as the Lion careened in the direction of the dark planet, its criteria for a pilot appearing to have a loophole that had been perfectly exploited to serve Arus’s greatest enemies.