

Part Three: RESTORED CYCLE



## Chapter 2

### Sixteen: Secrets Abound

*The scowling face of the viceroy is quite befitting the situation*, Zarkon thought with amusement. He raised his palm elegantly, assuming a demeanor concerned with etiquette, though any spectator to this political game would see through the deliberately satirical ruse. “I see no need to apologize for past events, Throk,” he complemented his poise with a croon, “after all, you Drules helped Lotor succeed in his little coup d’état against me...”

“The public is outraged with this news!” Throk bellowed. “They are flocking to the side of the rebels! Support is drastically falling for the Emperor and the Imperial campaign.”

“The Emperor should have expected this from me. The compromise made long ago for Opachre to be annexed into my territory, in exchange for my keeping the information about Planet Drule to myself...but, as soon as I was thrust into a robeast, you pounced on that world like a desperate little whore willing to degrade herself for that slab of meat,” Zarkon sneered as he let the imagery in his words develop a foul taste in Throk’s mouth. Throk audibly sucked in his breath as his eyes widened from fury. Zarkon snickered, “So, now the Universe knows what wonderful environmentalists you Drules are; surely you cannot be surprised why so few planets want to welcome you with open arms? Oh, that’s right,” Zarkon put his index finger to his large, fanged lips as he looked away for effect, “it slipped my mind that you were spending all these years looking for other worlds.” He tapped his lip as he thoughtfully provoked, “For quite a while there, I thought you were simply conquering peoples and blowing planetary bodies up just for the glory of war. Such a rarity for me to have come to such an incorrect and silly conclusion.” Zarkon returned his focus to the screen, where a speechless Throk looked as though his brain had shattered every neuron.

“As I have aforementioned,” Zarkon began with a regal air, “the past is complete. This is an opportunity to consider new conditions to our relationship. I want Opachre, again, and as is obvious by the reports you have no doubt received, my forces have already reclaimed the world. To display good faith, I propose a joint attack in the Milky Way Galaxy. I have insiders that have determined that there is a large fusion reactor located in the Galaxy Garrison’s heavily bureaucratic sector of that galaxy. I do believe that the Empire has had great difficulty in that entire galaxy due to some Voltron composed of vehicles. If you withdraw your forces from Opachre’s boundaries, reveal your spies that the Alliance has yet to catch on Dhm to me, I will allow a certain quota of Drules to immigrate to my governed worlds, as well as launch a direct attack against Garrison with the Drule Empire.” He folded his arms. “What say the Emperor? Shall I hold while you fetch the news to him?”

“This matter will require some time,” the viceroy uttered plainly, already cursing himself for his emotions getting the better of him and giving Zarkon an advantage.

“Do not deliberate too long,” the King warned, “Or I may not bother with statesmanship the next time,” he added with a suggestive sneer.

Viceroy Throk commanded his soldier to cut the transmission. Once this was done, he pummeled his armrests with his fists. “I hate Duonulans,” he spat.

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“It is done. Saoche is on her way.” Reyk’s words hushed the bustling hall of Castle Dhm, which had been busy in preparation for the Alliance attacks that were sure to come. Since there was no time to create an army of robotic drones, the Dhmk, Matuathian, and Duonulan civilians took the responsibility on to their own shoulders. The planet was theirs once again; they would not lose it again so quickly. The air carried the collective force of their will, the mantra that they would all perish before surrendering, and all felt it.

Zarkon was discussing strategies and troop placement with Shai's generals and the Dhmk chiefs. In the past, there would have been governors present, but they either been killed by Lotor or the Alliance in that fateful battle months ago. He turned his head as his ear twitched in Reyk's direction. "Very good. Her prisoner is the Arusian princess, no?" he simply asked as though its significance was slight to his plans.

Reyk's eyes glowed. "I see that she has indeed commandeered the Princess." He nodded emphatically to confirm his observation.

"Well, what did I tell you, Lotor?" Zarkon turned and regarded his son who had stopped any military conversation once the notion of Allura was announced. "Did I not say the Princess would be yours?"

Lotor smiled and bowed formally, a calm external response that was in complete contrast to the euphoria he was feeling inside. *Yes yes yes! I have you now, my lovely, sublime Allura! It has been so long since I have laid eyes upon your perfect form. How I've longed to see your smile, hear your voice, and feel your presence!*

"Is he going to be all right?" Reyk whispered to Zarkon, as Lotor's gaze was glassy and distant.

"He'll be like that for hours if I let him," Zarkon grumbled while he crossed his arms. He glared at his love struck son and frowned to hint at his disgust. "I am this close to having Jepaya punching him whenever he gets that look," Zarkon warned, holding his fingers an inch apart to gauge his dwindling tolerance for the crush.

"You have your planet, he has his girl. Be happy, Zarkon," Reyk advised. Zarkon retorted, "I will be happy when the victory is complete. It can still slip through my grasp if I celebrate prematurely," he clenched the air for effect. He could almost feel the ether

dripping through his fingers. He was almost visualizing the phantasmal element when he heard, “Grandfather! Izzat you? Yes, it is! Always the snazzy dresser!”

The resulting “Hunh?” that blurted itself out of Zarkon’s mouth was loud enough to echo through the hall and effectively silence any other sounds or voices. Even the physical movements of the busy bodies halted in place. Karna ran towards the foyer from the makeshift laboratory he helped Hagar set up in the castle, apparently sensing the arrival beforehand.

“Arjuna! Yudishthira! You have returned alive!” He shouted joyously. Upon hearing the mention of the Royal Triplets being wholly among them, the citizens and subjects gave a harmonious cheering and clapping storm. Zarkon followed his grandson, his curiosity about how the other two had matured ecstatic it would soon be fulfilled. He saw two teal youths the same height as Karna, equaling the happiness of their sibling with their own smiles and dimpled yellow eyes.

“Hear that, Yudy? Karna thinks we’re a bunch o’ wimps,” Arjuna teased. “C’mere, you,” he put his younger brother in a headlock and proceeded to rustle Karna’s hair. He playfully resisted all the while, “Hey, I’m a sorcerer now! You can’t give me noogies without penalty anymore!”

“Isn’t he cute, Yudy?” Arjuna continued as he curled Karna’s hair. “And look at all this hair! So, dull and monocolored. Give me one hour, and I will remedy this lickety-split.” At the mention of his curly white locks potentially ending up like Arjuna’s multi-hued coiffure, Karna’s resisting turned genuine.

Zarkon was not sure how to absorb the scenario. In the past, he would have actively scolded and punished such outbursts of emotion. It was unbecoming to be so elated when situations were so dire and there were serious matters to attend to. Yet, as he looked around him, his perspective seemed to be the lonely minority; no one appeared to

be insulted by this behavior. In fact, he could feel the morale rising exponentially, threatening to crash through the castle ceiling.

“Enough,” Yudishthira quietly chided his brothers, “you know that this is improper. And we have not even greeted Our Majesty with the respect that is required.” With that lecture complete, Yudishthira prostrated himself, his own platinum blonde hair neatly tied back. “Greetings, Your Majesty, Grandfa....”

“Look how big I’ve gotten! I bet I can lift you!” Unaffected by the preach, Arjuna proceeded to hug Zarkon, and try lifting him. He grunted as his back began to arch. “Uh...never mind,” he groaned as he lowered Zarkon the quarter of an inch he had accomplished.

Yudishthira was absolutely mortified. He was always dreading this possibility would occur. He had managed to personally accept his grandfather’s lack of affection as his personality, but Arjuna had always been outspoken and wildly unconventional. Even as children, Arjuna had been the only child, nay, person to actively seek out Zarkon’s emotional response. And amazingly, he had never been denied, whereas Lotor could have hand delivered the Universe on a plate and been snorted at.

“And don’t make those faces behind my back. Can’t a grandson be happy to see his grandpa, long presumed dead by the entire, FRIGGIN’ Universe?!” Arjuna commented aloud with a bit of annoyance at his older brother without looking. He cleared his throat before taking a step away from his grandfather, who was silent and motionless. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. After these countless months of seeing nothing but misery and helplessness, I see hope. And it’s great!” Arjuna took Zarkon’s right hand and pressed his forehead into it, his black hairs draping over the display.

Zarkon looked down at his grandson with the most unique hair he had ever seen. It brought a smile to his worn face. Arjuna’s indomitable spirit and fierce loyalty was

something he had to cherish. He often thought the phrase of unconditional love was overused, but if he allowed himself to think about it long enough, Arjuna was probably the only person that held him with such regard. He knew he could never reciprocate anything like that, and tried to compensate by allowing the personality to thrive despite his influence. He destroyed so many things and crushed the wills of countless souls; sparing a special one was challenging, but worth every drop of effort. He made him happy. Arjuna made Zarkon feel like a grandfather.

He felt the emotions that had been sweltering inside him throughout the recent ordeals boiling within his body. It disconcerted him, and he knew he had to dissuade them with something acute.

“I am joyous that you two are well and alive. The royal family is united, and will stand the test of time as a symbol of our realm’s strength and sufficiency. I behold you three, and I see hope.” Yudishthira wanted to wail in his grandfather’s arms, but he maintained his composure while Karna pat his shoulder understandingly. Arjuna encircled his brothers with his powerful arms, and hugged them intensely.

“We are one big happy family,” he crooned as he snuggled them.

“Now, what is Hagar up to, Karna?” Zarkon pressed a new topic, uncomfortable.

“She is working diligently, but she says she would be in a more productive state of mind if she had her due audience with you,” he replied with the twinkle of his eye hidden by Arjuna’s pressed cheek.

“Fine, I’ll go,” Zarkon said exasperatedly. “Take care you three. And get reacquainted with your uncle.” Zarkon stepped back into the hall where the military meeting had been waiting for his return. His words were trite and brief, as he quickly departed them as well to handle Hagar.

*That old crone will have me my old thinking self again in no time*, he mused to himself.

Meanwhile, Lotor had already streamed down to the foyer in the direction of the cheering and saw Karna's two companions. He instantly knew they were his nephews, and the men that were looking back at him was a startling comparison to his last memory of them as tiny Dhmk-looking types.

"Lotor!" Arjuna shouted.

Lotor considered the appearance of the one that addressed him. The anarchic hairstyle and novel outfit could only mean that he was Arjuna all grown up. "Arjuna?" Lotor asked for confirmation.

Arjuna approached him with an assertive pace, his face alight with anticipation. "Lotor!" he reiterated. Before the prince could vocalize a reply, his nephew's fist had introduced itself to his jaw in the intimate manner of a street brawler. The force was a shock for Lotor, as his body twisted before falling to the floor.

"THAT'S for mucking up my first irreplaceable months as an adult. And for turning my planet into an Alliance clubhouse," Arjuna pointed at him fiercely, jabbing the air.

Lotor wiped the sanguine trickle of fluid cascading down the corner of his mouth. His dark sleeve absorbed the blood, and he looked no worse for wear. He hoisted himself up and glared at his attacker angrily. "I did nothing of the sort. You will suffer for you attack against the Crown Prince of Dhmk!"

Arjuna crossed his arms and lifted his head to engage in a staring debacle with him. He smirked, unthreatened by his uncle's potential to harm him. "Hah, I've seen Cobra crap things more terrifying than you. But if you wanna go at it, I'll happily oblige you. But no weapons save our fists. I don't need a gun to pound the snob outta ya!"

Lotor laughed malevolently, gesturing with open arms. "Ready when you are, rainbow."

Arjuna pulled his arms back, folding his biceps as he prepared to deliver another stinging blow. Yudishthira leapt in between the two. Arjuna stayed his hand, as did Lotor. Yudishthira turned to his uncle and bowed respectfully. "Forgive my brother, Your Highness. He is frustrated by the hardships we have learned our planet has gone through. Because you are heir to the throne, he feels that you improperly handled the Alliance's invasion. Now that things are being rectified, I beseech you to ignore his aggression." He bowed his head to the floor. Arjuna clicked his tongue at the sight.

"Arjuna," Yudishthira lifted his head and looked at his brother, "apologize to the Prince." Lotor was smug as he waited for the subjugation.

"Hell no," Arjuna harshly defied. He turned on his heels and stomped away. "The only way I'll say sorry is if Lotor says it to Gramps. And I think we can all agree THAT will never happen," he quipped in the meantime. He reached the automatic doors at the end of the foyer, which slid apart for him. "If you want me, I'll be getting some well-deserved private time with my planet," he announced with a pompous air before the doors closed after him.

Yudishthira stood up, shaking his head.

Lotor felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. *What did he mean I should apologize to Father? What did I ever do to HIM?* his mind pondered as confusion dulled

his senses. He knew his thoughts, his mind, were incomplete, that a part of him was being imprisoned and left to fester away. He shook his head violently.

“Uncle, are feeling well? I hope Arjuna did not give you a concussion,” Yudishthira worried while Karna looked sadly.

“No, that jab was nothing,” Lotor dissuaded. “I just...I am just thinking about something I just realized. I’m fine,” he assured his nephew.

“Really?”

Lotor smiled emphatically. “Mmm,” he mumbled. “And for your honest concern, I will let that transgression slide. But only this once,” he added conditionally.

Yudishthira nodded. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

Lotor smirked as he took leave of his nephews. *I should thank Arjuna for knocking some sense into me. I must find out what is being hidden from the rest of me.* He stroked his chin and mused about his nephew that shared his own penchant for violent expression. *I admire his bravery. Anyone daring enough to risk scarring my face is a brave soul indeed. However, his foolishness will not be a trait I will tolerate.*

Alone with his elder brother, Karna finally spoke his opinion on everything that had happened. “Big HAPPY family my ass,” he spat.

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“Hmm.”

“Hmm.”

The paltry use of syllables was full of the orator’s tension. The elderly monarch

faced forward, though did his best to not stare directly at his companion. Conversely, the arcane witch did not take her eyes off him. The strained situation did have its effect on her, but in a different way. She fidgeted in her chair, occasionally pretending to brush some of Coba's hairs off of her tattered robe.

King Zarkon tapped his long talons on the lacquered table. Its length provided a suitable medium for his nail's strumming to reach Hagar's ears. He sighed loudly, pretending this was a dull bit of tedium barely worth his concern. Hagar visibly attempted to settle more easily into her chair, with a satisfied, sultry "Ahhh" killing the silence.

"I would not get too comfortable if I were you," Zarkon finally used his vocabulary to form a coherent sentence.

"Why not?" Hagar asked demurely, which had a disturbing connotation to it, considering it was coming from a decidedly decaying body.

Zarkon shuddered in reply, but his draping clothes prevented it from being visible. "I will allow you to have a lab and do all of the things you did before in your spare time," he growled. "However," he added as he lifted a finger, "You are not to be reinstated as my advisor."

Hagar bolted straight up. "What about the custom?!" she cried out, though inward she wished he had genuinely missed her. "I want what is rightfully mine!"

"I gave you what is rightfully yours; but, I cannot ignore all of your pathetic failures before you started watching my grandchildren. In fact, your warding is the only reason I am keeping you around. Personally, I would have you as far away from me as possible, but for the sake of custom, the Triplets, and this planet's morale, I will commit the only act of altruism I will EVER do in my entire life...but don't quote me on that, or I will snap you in two. I don't care how many times you zap me with that stick of yours, I will do it,"

he announced with finality, choosing to finish with a threatening quip.

Hagar sat back in her chair, though her frown was horrific enough to crack the long table's finish. Her heart had been torn apart by this man so many times in the past, and just when it seemed it would heal, the scars were torn anew. Even when she thought she had the upper hand, he always managed to shatter her self-confidence and turn the tables on her. It was the harshest kind of addiction; utterly destructive, but she craved the possibility of a union more and more each time.

"Must you always be so blunt when everyone knows you are capable of speaking with far more tact?" Shai emerged from behind Hagar, a scowl on her face.

Zarkon pointed behind her. "How long have you been here?" His eyes widened in surprise.

Shai sucked in her breath, her throat rumbling like a lioness's. "Long enough to witness the lack of rapport between you two. And I am far less than pleased."

Zarkon narrowed his yellow eyes, which commenced glowing red as his temper awoke. "You are the mind reader of us all; you should be the least surprised. Besides, I actually TOLD you how I felt about her, anyway," he replied defensively as he harshly tossed his hand towards Hagar's person.

"This is not the time to burn bridges, Zarkon, especially when the have not even finished being built in the first place," she lectured him. Her harsh gaze softened as she gave him a small smile. "Pouting does not become you," she observed with an impish gleam in her eyes. Zarkon shrugged and turned away from the two women as he turned his nose upwards.

“I was not pouting. I was...grumbling silently.” He closed his eyes and folded his arms. He sighed as he feigned resignation. “Very well, Shai. I will give Hagar another chance as my advisor.” *I will not have to wait long before she fails in some way, I bet*, he thought to himself.

*Ah ah ah, Zarkon*, Shai’s mental voice permeated the king’s thoughts in a playful scold. *Remember, I am the mind reader of the pack*, she modified the mocking epithet.

*Are you here only to come to Hagar’s rescue?* he pressed in the telepathic conversation. *It would be a touching display of sisterhood if that is the case...but please tell me it isn’t. The saccharine is about to rot my teeth.*

*Actually, I came to discuss the issue of the Arusian princess with you when I was told that you were in a private audience with Hagar. You seemed to be enjoying yourselves so much, I almost did not want to intrude*, her psychic warbled as though from laughter.

“Hagar, my spell-sister,” Shai placed her arms about the sitting witch, “do you wish some respite from this uncouth man of ours?” she joked, watching from the corner of her eyes as Zarkon started choking on his own saliva. He coughed violently as Hagar smirked upwards at her questioner.

“It would be in my best interests I am sure,” she complied as she lifted herself from her prone position. The swarthy monarch’s eyes watered from his sudden spasm as she humbly bowed to him before departing.

Shai chose to sit in the now vacant chair. She arched a delicate eyebrow as a concerned look drifted across her azure face. “Do you need a drink?”

He shook his head to suggest the negative as he pounded on his chest with his fist. “My body forgot what it felt like...to be mortally embarrassed...and consumed with homicidal rage...at the same time. Thanks for the refresher, my lady,” his initial phrases sliced apart by panting, he completed the admission with his typical dry composure and wit.

“If it is any consolation, no one dares to use the biting sarcasm with me that you do,” she offered a truce.

“We are making up for lost time then?”

“If that is what you want to attribute it to, so be it,” Shai declared with a palm brushing the breezeless air. “Now then, shall we discuss the princess?”

Zarkon lowered his chin into his cupped hands, regarding her curiously. “What has you worried? She is utterly worthless without her guards or Voltron harem about to wipe her superfluous tears.”

Shai’s eyes widened. “Bitter, are we? I guess it only takes one bad blonde to ruin the whole bunch.”

“You are thinking of apples, Shai,” Zarkon retorted impatiently. “And I think I have a right to be bitter. After all...”

“...she stole your son from you, no?” Shai finished the statement, her words cryptic with allusion. Zarkon was not sure if she was accusing Allura then, and the potential mention of Lotor’s late mother as the alternative affected him. He leaned his left cheek on his hands that had since balled into a pair of clenched fists. The grip was enough to dig his long nails into his palms. Cascades of dark blood oozed from behind his fingers, sizzling a

corroded path as it dissolved the fibers of his sleeves away. Drops landed on the lacquered tabletop, making permanent scabs in its once flawless finish.

“I have gathered a great deal of information about her lineage and her exploits. The rumors about her deceased father disturb me the most, though,” Shai resumed her initial topic.

“He was a lousy fighter. Pragmatic when it came to merging magic and technology, but inept with a blade or gun. Even if the eclipse had not occurred, the advantage would still have been in my favor. And that is no boast. That is fact.” Shai knew from his tone that he spoke honestly, a rare circumstance that she always knew to consider strongly when it happened.

“A ghost does not have need of blades or guns, Zarkon,” Shai explained her concern. “I believe that his daughter is his earthly link to this plane. If she is within close proximity of you, the apparition of her father may confront you.”

“Shai, I am not afraid of some post-human ectoplasm. Let him rattle his chains, howl his moans, groan and throw things about. A poltergeist is the least of my problems. The Living are more threatening. If the dead cannot rest, that is their fault, not mine, and I do not care. Mayhap he will do me a favor, and make Lotor see Allura is not worth his further attention. But, until that moment comes, let the specter do its worst.”

Shai groaned as she rubbed her temples together. “You know it is more complicated than that. He may recall...some of his last moments...with you...” she finally revealed the underlying reason of her vigilance. “The eclipse, factored with your presumed heritage created a final memory that could easily have imprinted on his immortal soul.” Zarkon’s visage was overcome with the importance of what she was referring to. He rose from his seat and walked over to her. He leaned and whispered into her feline ears.

“You think he will recall it to everyone if he sees me?”

She turned to him, and spoke telepathically. *If he mentions, remembers, what transpired, your identity will be uncovered for sure. You know what the consequences are for you, your descendants, and your Empire.* “Can you accept that risk?” she finished out loud as she stood. Her shape morphed into a mirror image of Zarkon. “Well,” she urged in a voice that was his precise baritone, “can you risk losing everything you have worked for...forever?”

Zarkon placed a hand on the side of Shai’s transformed face. “I have never had any other choice than to gamble that wager time and time again,” he answered. Suddenly, a faint noise caught their attention. They both looked at the amulet with Lotor’s hair in it that Shai wore at his request. There was a tiny crack. Shai reverted to her original form, covering his hand with hers as she looked up at him.

“I hope you know what you are doing.”

“I do, Shai. I always know.”

### **Seventeen: Four Lions and a Lady?**

“I see you are finally waking up.”

Hunk woke up with a groan as his eyelids fluttered. His ears tuned to the concerned voice that sounded close to his face. His eyes registered a blurred visage, but, as they adjusted to the bright fluorescent light in the room, the image cleared to reveal Ana’s face.

“Ana...I’m back on Arus?” he asked weakly. He felt disoriented, not sure of exactly how he was back on the planet. *The last thing I remember is...is...* he reconstructed his jumbled thoughts until a chronological replay of the fateful events fused into a cohesive movie in his mind. *Allura, Saoche...Saoche took Allura and the Blue Lion off course...and then...*

He rubbed his head, sighing at his inability to recall anything else. “Did the others...are the others..?” he fearfully whispered to Ana.

“They are fine. They have been waiting anxiously for your recovery. The Yellow Lion took the brunt of that electromagnetic attack. Had Prince Bandor’s ship not received Keith’s SOS, all of your Lions’ backup life-support systems would have been depleted,” Ana explained in great detail. “Unfortunately,” she added with a curt frown and a clenched fist, “the Princess and the Blue Lion have been successfully abducted by the spy.”

“The Princess? NO!” he shouted as he leaped from bed. *Poor Keith! He must be beating himself up non-stop!* “Why are they waiting for me?! They should be chasing that little turncoat across the Universe!” He then realized that he did not know whom Saoche was a spy for. Sheepishly, he asked Ana, “Umm, who was Saoche working for?” Hunk

rubbed the back of his head as he smiled uneasily. He hoped he was not giving a poor impression of himself.

“Zarkon and Lotor, who else?” Ana stated matter-of-factly. “Except they are sporting new allies of some sort. New ships, new technology, and new soldiers have been doing their best to reduce Arus to shreds. Keith, Lance, and Pidge have been flying the Lions during each new wave of attacks, unable to send the army in full retreat. Luckily,” she began as an aside as she gestured to herself, “I have been helping out, thanks to the Prince loaning me one of his fighter ships.”

“Come again? You’re a pilot?!”

“Yes,” she answered succinctly. “I learned to fly when I was a young girl with my mother. That was before Zarkon’s campaign had plundered this world and murdered the royal family,” she answered bitterly. “And without Voltron, we are at a serious disadvantage. That was why nobody objected too loudly when I volunteered...well, Nanny grumbled a little, but she’s gonna be cranky until the Princess is back safe and sound.” Ana playfully punched Hunk in the arm. “So, how ‘bout it? It’s been a couple of hours since the enemy wave ceased its attacks in order to regroup, which gives us a chance to whoop some alien scum! With you back in action, we won’t stop until we’re at Castle Dhm itself!”

Hunk could not help but smile at Ana’s relentless optimism. Her apparent fearlessness was a new trait he had never had a chance to see before, and it made him like her even more. He made a mental note to actually ask her out once this crisis was dealt with.

“C’mon, hurry up, get dressed!” she practically ordered him as she rushed to the room’s closet and tossed him his white uniform. She clapped her hands. “Chop chop!”

Hunk stumbled over his pant legs as he pulled them up, hopping like a rabbit. He then turned away from Ana and blushed.

“Errm, uh...could you, um, wait outside?” he asked as he felt blistering heat rush to his cheeks. He was so enthusiastic, he had forgotten that he was moments away from giving the innocent girl a peep show. He had since used his helmet to shield his pectorals.

Ana giggled, amused by the large pilot’s modesty. “You are the sweetest man,” she admitted as he gave him a slap on his buttocks. Surprised at the deft and force, he flinched forward. *Now I know my face is beet red, to match my bottom.* Rather than turn around and let Ana confirm the suspicion, he waited for the few seconds it required her to walk to the doorway. The doors slid apart, with Ana announcing, “If you aren’t out in five minutes, I’m barging in; I don’t care what condition you are in,” her voice warned with a sultry edge. Then, he heard her step out, and the sound of the doors sliding closed let him know he was alone.

It took him approximately three and a half more minutes to get the white suit on and run to the Control Room. Keith, Lance, and Pidge all cheered triumphantly, “Hunk!”

“How ya doin’, Big Guy?” Lance asked earnestly. His brow lifted to show his genuine interest about his well-being. Hunk flexed his biceps. “Well enough.”

“Glad to hear it, Hunk,” Keith replied, his voice and demeanor weary from lack of sleep and abundance of worry. Hunk felt the gloom surrounding his friend; it looked anchored by the dark bags underneath the Captain’s rueful eyes. He walked slowly up to Keith, and after a moment of pause, embraced him with fraternal concern. “It’s okay, we’ll get her back. I promise,” Hunk whispered so that only the two of them could hear it. Keith looked up quickly in surprise, wondering how Hunk had discerned how he really felt about the princess. Then, an accepting comprehension brought the first light in his dark eyes after many lugubrious days and nights of self-blame and disgust. “Well, then, team,

what are we waiting for?!” Keith cheered with renewed vigor. “Let’s show these newcomers what it means to take on the Voltron Force!”

“And me!” Ana added as she thrust her hand to meet the four men’s in the air.

In a matter of minutes, four robot lions and a fighter jet launched into the blue sky of Arus. The beautiful atmosphere seemed perverse considering the planet’s circumstance. Countless citizens observed the quintet and made silent prayers for the safe return of Princess Allura. An encroaching dark shadow sent them all running back into their homes’ cellars and basements.

“It looks like they are back earlier than expected,” Keith announced over the communicator.

“Ah, but look at the decreased number of fighter ships. They must have anticipated this to be an easy defeat,” Lance snickered. “Too bad for them.”

“No,” Hunk disagreed. “They probably do not want to waste resources on us; there must be something else going on now.”

“All that rest did you good,” Pidge concurred. “They must have decided a smaller force would be as effective.”

“It would have been,” Ana began sagely, but concluded with a smile,” but that was before Hunk was fighting with us. Four Lions instead of three, coupled with the small amount of enemy units...this is the only opportunity we’ll have to get to Dhm before they expect it.”

“Maybe they do? Maybe that’s why they’re doing this?” Lance thought.

The Sapientydan ships drew closer. Assuming a formation resembling the points of a cube, each parallel pair began to accelerate forward, rotating as they did so. The complete effect was artistically lovely, as though this display was for entertainment rather than war making.

Ana groaned. “A signature move. This is why they didn’t bother,” she whispered to herself. “Look at what they are doing!” she yelled aloud.

Keith nodded. “They are keeping their relative distances from each other.”

“They aren’t blasting us because they have something else planned. This jet does not have the capability to pick up their energy readings...” Ana yelled.

“Say no more, Ana,” Pidge chirped. His dexterous fingers and agile mind worked as synchronous as their opponents’ crafts. The Green Lion’s advanced ability to interpret electromagnetic waves was utilized to its utmost capacity. The Lion’s screen flickered and displayed various charts and manipulations of the data Pidge requested. Apparently satisfied with the answer he found, he disclosed it to the others. “Each pair of ships is generating a linear gravity beam. The beam has a large range.”

“So, in effect, there’s a spinning gravity cube heading right for us?!” Lance bellowed.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Everyone, split up!” Keith ordered. They quickly dispersed, putting as much distance between them as they could. The enemy responded by expanding the size of the cube, encompassing them all. The spacecrafts began to fire blasts in earnest, their arsenal equipped with technology that locked onto its target indefinitely.

“They are trying to push us closer together,” Hunk grit through his teeth as the Yellow Lion took a hit on its right side.

“Once they do it to the point the beams’ range covers us, we will collapse under the gravitational force,” Ana predicted somberly.

“Well, I am not going to get pushed into some invisible corner without a fight!” Lance charged forward, deftly avoiding the projectiles trailing him as he fired his own in a boisterous, cacophonous wave of attacks that were accented by the roaring fire emanating from the Red Lion’s metal jaws.

“This seems hopeless,” Pidge moaned. “There has to be some way I can figure out how to use those gravity beams against them.”

Hunk heard those words of his small friend through the communicator, and inspiration struck him. “Maybe if we pit them against each other?”

“What do you mean? Their ships are practically indestructible!” Ana cried out. “Gravity has no effect on them!”

“But smashing two of those ships together at an intense speed intensified by this gravity may do it.” Hunk used a frequency reserved for only the most extreme situations to explain his plan.

“Damn, Hunk,” Lance sounded impressed.

“I think this may actually work,” Ana agreed. “Nobody falter, okay?”

“Then we are ready to execute this. NOW!” Keith authorized with fervor.

“Away we go!” Pidge shouted as he lunged ahead, Ana close behind him. Soon, they were all in a single linear line, the dangerous enemy in quick pursuit, yet still maintaining its ominous structure. They increased their speed, flying through Arusian longitudes at a blinding pace. Ana’s ship could not handle the demand, as was expected by them all. Reversing the propulsion drives rendered her ship crashing forward at the center of the gravity plane generated. Simultaneously, she jettisoned forward. The Green Lion’s head had already detached and captured her in milliseconds. Ana recovered in the decompression chamber while the head reattached to the body. During this transaction, Pidge detected a weak point in the gravity cube’s structure: the introduction of explosive matter at such a demanding velocity had overcome the ships’ thresholds. Two pairs wavered in their positions as the pilots attempted to compensate for the oscillating gradient of force stressing the compartments on their ships that created the gravity beams. One pair could not handle the strain and remain impervious to the neighboring pairs’ sectors: they crashed into the center of another pair’s gravity field.

This prompted a reformation on the Sapientydan’s part.

“Eh eh eh, not so fast,” Hunk admonished as he used the Yellow Lion’s proton harpoon to pierce the gravity mechanism in one ship while Keith pierced its adjacent craft’s gravity beam. This permitted Black Lion and Yellow Lion to be shielded from the effects of the gravity beam by the Sapientydan ships themselves. Before the two ships had completed the shutdown of the gravity beam, they had been dragged through the remaining ships. Keith and Hunk disintegrated the harpoons and fled as the unstable gravity fields left over consumed the pair of Sapientydan ships. Eventually, all the gravity waves cancelled each other out and imploded the debris into metallic meteorites that harmlessly plummeted to the Arusian surface.

Ana staggered into Green Lion’s cockpit. “It worked! Incredible!” She used Pidge’s pilot seat to support herself as she allowed her body time to readjust.

“That was a huge chance you took, Ana,” Pidge revealed to her. “If my calculations had been a thousandth-of-a-second off, I would not have been there in time to get you before your body splattered apart at the speed it would be going at.”

“Pidge!” Hunk yelled at him harshly. “Try to be a little sensitive, huh?!”

Ana chuckled. “It’s quite all right. In fact, I’m better than all right, because we have a prime opportunity to attack them at Dhm now!”

“True,” Lance nodded,” and we’ve got tons of bombs to allow us passage into Dhm’s airspace,” he added further, alluding to the asteroid rings surrounding the dark planet. The last time they had entered Dhm, it was with the help of the Pulse Cannon, which had since suffered mechanical breakdown. All of the ships had a considerable stockpile of them; Ana’s ship had more storage capacity than the Lions, which had accounted for its considerable effect in the victorious strategy.

“Here we go! On to Planet Dhm!” Keith shouted.

Ana smiled as she pat Pidge’s shoulder and beheld a blushing Hunk on the communicator screen. “Yes, to Dhm we go,” she whispered. “You are mine, Shai.”

### **Chapter 3 Eighteen: Between Ladies**

Allura awoke, alone in her body, and grateful for it. She was not sure how she knew that Saoche was no longer a part of her, but she did. Her body felt heavy and weak, as though it had been strained vigorously to the point of exhaustion. She was lying on her back, on a soft fabric, probably a mattress. She forcefully opened her eyelids, which fluttered under the struggle at first. Her vision slowly came into focus, and revealed a distant ceiling, ornate with dark swirls, computer lights...and a horned skull. Allura knew where she was.

She would have lunged up in shock, but her body simply could not accomplish such a feat when it was so tired. She gingerly hoisted her torso up by pushing her hands against the mattress, groaning as she did so. Her eyes shut from the exertion. When her eyes opened again, she could see that she was not alone in the room.

Yudishthira sat in a chair a few feet away from the bed, one leg over the other. He stared at her with an inquisitive, studious look. Allura was surprised at first. *I would have expected Lotor*, she thought to herself. Then, she decided she was probably better off. She straightened her back as she attempted to convey a sense of aloofness. “Why are you looking at me so?” She did her best to sound authoritative and calm, though she would have preferred to lunge kicking and screaming.

Yudishthira gave a small smile that lacked any ill intent. “Just trying to abate some curiosity is all,” was the reply before replacing his chin on his hand.

Allura felt uneasy with the scrutiny. It was disconcerting to her; it seemed different from Lotor’s mad, obsessive gaze, but she was not sure why she believed so. She rubbed her arms as a sudden chill swam through her skin.

“Are you cold?” Yudishthira asked. “I can have the temperature of the room raised, if you like. You may as well get accustomed to being here.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Allura demanded with no pretense of princess grace. She rose slowly as she placed her hands on her hips. “If you think that I am going to sit here and let Zarkon and Lotor decide MY fate, you had better think again,” she spoke forcefully as she leaned over her sitting guard. The blue Dhmk sneered and ran his left hand through his white hair. He narrowed his eyes and gave a small chuckle, which infuriated Allura further. His voice was smooth and a sultry croon as he spoke to her, which enervated her. “Please, Allura, you have never been in control of your own fate. It has simply been transferred between owners. Now, now, it is difficult to realize that your destiny is designed by your hired help, but simply denying the truth leaves you powerless in your delusion.”

*He patronizes me!* she thought angrily. *And he speaks so poorly of Coran and Nanny!* “Say what you will of me, but do NOT address my loved ones with disrespect!” She yelled, her pitch low and fierce as she grabbed a pillow from the bed while confronting him.

“Has Lotor ever seen you bellow like this?” Yudishthira simply suggested, undaunted by the aggressive display. “If he did, he may leave you alone for the rest of your life...”

Allura decided to abandon her inhibitions and slam him in the face with the pillow. Of course, Yudishthira’s agile eyes caught the attack and allowed him to catch the pillow with his hand. Allura would not let go, tugging it with all her might as she tried to wrench it from his surprisingly strong grip. “I...don’t care...about...Lotor!” she spat in between her tugging and grunting. “I...WISH...he would leave...me...alone...”

Yudishthira sniffed in contempt. “Hmph, doesn’t look like that from my end.” He released the pillow, and due to all of her continued efforts to pull it away, an unexpected Allura fell back, pillow in hand. “Admit it, you like the attention. You are a tease.” Allura stood up, her body visibly shaking from fury. “But, who wouldn’t?” Yudishthira mused with a shrug of the shoulders to emphasize the rhetoric.

“Dodge THIS!” Allura screamed as she flung her full body weight onto Yudishthira, who had not expected such behavior from the characteristically repressed princess. They rolled and writhed on the ground, as Allura tried her hardest to scratch his eyes out. “Not so tough without those bird feet, are ya?!” she spat viciously. Yudishthira raised an eyebrow before finding his foot was against her belly. He kicked her away, but not before Allura took a sizable portion of his shirt with her. As she landed on her buttocks, she noticed a flash of something undoubtedly female behind her enemy’s ripped attire. A look of confusion accompanied her cognitive bewilderment.

Yudishthira’s face darkened as he stood up, covering the exposure with his arms. He glared murderously at Allura, his fanged teeth bared, his eyes glowing a rageful red.

“Are...are you...what I think you are...? Are you a wom...” she sputtered out. Unfortunately, she could not finish her query before Yudishthira sent a punch into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her. As she lay on the floor, coughing and gasping, “he” crouched above her.

“If you tell anyone what you have seen, I will personally cut out your tongue and chop off your hands, and feed them to the robeasts,” Yudishthira threatened blatantly, grabbing a batch of Allura’s blonde hair and jerking her head up. Her teeth rattled from the abrupt movement. Her eyes met those of Zarkon’s disguised granddaughter. “Do I make myself clear?” Allura nodded slightly, her breathing heavy and her breasts heaving. Yudishthira appeared satisfied, dropping Allura’s head to let gravity do what it would with it. She stood up, and proceeded to reverse her shirt so that the ripped side only revealed

her back. She managed to accomplish this without completely removing it; a simple task of taking her arms out of the sleeves and rotating it around her neck achieved the goal nicely and modestly.

Yudishthira then gave a light kick into the fallen Arusian princess. It was not as debilitating as the previous punch, but it was noticeable enough to elicit a grunt out of the victim. “Remember my words; I surely will.”

The next thing Allura heard was Yudishthira’s boots clicking near the doorway. The electric hum of the sliding sheets of metal to provide an exit were then followed by a more distant sound of clicking footwear. She sighed in a broken trill as she clutched her bruised stomach, tears escaping onto her soft cheeks. *Maybe Lotor would not have been so bad after all.*

Yudishthira walked down the corridor, seeing that Shai was calmly waiting her turn. She felt uneasy around Shai since she had learned that the woman possessed psychic powers. She feared that her secret was already known to Shai, and therefore her grandfather may already know. She was terrified that this revelation would label her a traitor, but she had not even been aware that she was female until she had completed the pupal stage. In fact, it was only due to Cossack’s being asleep on the job that she had managed to dress herself and announce her arrival before her brothers emerged from their metamorphic slumber. Dhmk children were identical except for one tell-tale feature: girls had a yellow stripe horizontally across the bridge of their nose. She had surmised that her chimeric heritage had rendered that particular pigment unexpressed. With her grandfather mourning his daughter’s death while bearing her children, he waived the genetic testing as he was completely certain of paternity and lineage.

Shai approached her, understanding the cloud of fear in the Dhmk’s mind. She removed a shawl wrapped around her own outfit and draped it over Yudishthira’s

shoulders to hide the wounded article of clothing. Yudishthira looked warily at Shai, who simply nodded.

*Fear not, Yudishthira. I have known since the moment I saw you, but I understand, and thus say and think nothing. Your secret is safe, and your own to divulge when you feel it is time. It is your right to do so. From one female to another, this is the highest symbol of respect I can offer you.* Shai thought telepathically.

Yudishthira nodded in return and silently mouthed a thanks before hurrying to her quarters to change. Shai approached the room where Allura was being sequestered. The doors slid open, and she glided in to find the princess hoisting herself from the floor. She glanced up, morbid apprehension awash her face. Shai sported a crooked, elfish smile. “Shall we get started?”

“Who...who are you?” Allura whispered. She had never seen a being like this before. It was as though a cat, a human, and a demon had merged into one form. It was covered in draping fabrics, with a levitating cape floating around the being. It was wondrous looking attire that denoted someone of high rank was here before her. Although there was nothing physically ugly about her visitor, she knew that looks meant nothing. If this female alien was working with DhM, then she was a horrible person at heart.

“Really, my dear, you should not be presumptuous. It leaves a poor first impression,” Shai said in response to the girl’s thoughts, shaking her finger. She held her hand out for Allura to grab a hold of and completely lift herself from the floor. “We may yet be allies.”

“Why are you doing this? Things were finally peaceful in our galaxy. Now, that tranquility’s been destroyed!” Allura cried in frustration and remorse.

“You will find that things are never completely peaceful,” Shai preached as she sat on the bed’s edge. As she caressed the luxurious sheets beneath her fingers, she added,

“While your part of the galaxy was idyllic, Dhm and other planets were full of bloodshed and oppression. A shift of sorts, though you may never have thought of the Dhm Empire as being peaceful, but relatively, it was. So, you see, my dear, it would appear that they were more desperate for their version of peace than you were for yours. But, that is the way of the Universe: you have to fight the most for what you want.”

Allura sat beside the woman on the bed, shaking her head. “I don’t believe that there must be pain and suffering. I have to believe that it’s possible to exist without it. That all sides can be satisfied and happy.”

Shai frowned. “Then you are doomed to be a poor ruler. A ruler must make harsh decisions sometimes for the best of their people. A ruler must know when to have pleas fall on deaf ears, and when to listen. Above all, a ruler must understand the people. If you do nothing but romanticize your Arusians as pacifists, they will always be at the mercy of an aggressive force. I cannot believe they do not know how to fight if they survived as long as they did under Zarkon’s campaign; it is you who believe they are weak and incapable of fending for themselves. This is dangerous; think like that long enough, and you will be overthrown, no matter how many times you fly that Blue Lion and form Voltron.” Her voice was even and sage, with countless years of experience to support her argument.

Allura lowered her head, turning her eyes away from the orator. “It is all right, Princess Allura,” Shai said with a hint of reassurance. “Your time spent in political webs has been brief. I am giving you some advice to take. You wish nothing but the best for your subjects, and I admire that. You possess no other motive than to make life as good as it can possibly be for them. However, your naïveté makes you appear foolish and unrealistic. No matter what happens from this moment forward, heed my words, and heed them well.”

Shai stood up and turned away, the rustling of her drapery almost musical. Allura could not help but watch the folds. “I wish to hear something from you. Not a thought for me to pull from you, but a vocalization, a testament to your feelings,” Shai began. “Speak truthfully: is there nothing but hatred in your heart for Lotor?” She turned slightly, her eyes casting a powerful stare.

Allura’s shoulders trembled under the power of the look. “I can’t love someone who has hurt so many of those I love and loved. I could marry anybody else if I had to for my people’s sake and I felt nothing, but not him. Never him.” Her voice grew harsh and thick, “I would sooner take my own life.” She lifted her eyes, and returned a forceful glare of her own. “So, if this is what you are here to make me do, you may as well kill me before I do.”

Shai laughed heartily, which caught Allura completely by surprise. Shai placed a hand upon her own chest as it shook. “Well, we can’t have that, can we?” Her laughing quickly ceased as she grinned, showcasing her pointed feline fangs. “Forgive me if I think I can convince you otherwise.” As she said this, she pulled a couple of strands of Allura’s golden hair, brandishing them. “Allow me to provide your dowry.”

**Nineteen: Provocation**

“Lotor, you’re killing me over here!”

A pacing Lotor momentarily stopped to glare ominously at Saoche, who apparently found the repetition obnoxious. “Keep pushing me, bird, and I will show you how I kill,” he threatened.

The gray-feathered avian hopped off the console she had been perched upon, using the artificially generated air currents courtesy of the Castle’s climate control system to float in the room. “Izzat so? After I’ve done for you and bring your \*girlfriend\* here? Thou art quite the bastard, aren’t you?” she teased, intent on emphasizing girlfriend and bastard with a mocking tone. She winked as he continued to grimace. “Aw, what’s the matter? Suddenly got cold feet?” she further goaded his temper. Flapping over to his shoulder, she sat plump and grabbed a hefty chunk of his cheek in her digits as she provoked, “Awww, you’re shyyyyy!”

Lotor slapped her off of him, which did no damage to his tormentor. Saoche landed at a safe distance, her feet daintily greeting the metal flooring. “Just talk to her already! Jeez, one would THINK you would be fawning over her incessantly now that she’s here, yet THIS is the time you exhibit some backbone?!” She rubbed her feather crest as she shook her head. “Damn you are an enigma. One minute you’re loving her, next minute you’re killing her, the third minute you’re pondering your sexuality...”

Lotor nearly squealed from the insinuation. “I do not! Contemplate my sexuality, that is...” he clarified. “Would you like to talk to my harem for confirmation?” he leered over her, grinning devilishly.

Saoche tapped her lower jaw. “Ah, so that’s what you’ve been doing! Way to go buddy, I underestimated ya!” She punched him lightly in the calf muscle. “Get out all of your sexual frustrations BEFORE you meet Allura, so you are thinking with the head above your waist!” She clapped furiously in deliberately overdramatic acclaim, with her words leading to Lotor blushing like a twentieth century schoolgirl. She used her telekinesis to push Lotor towards the doorway. “Well, time’s a wastin.’ Go talk to her before your refractory period’s up.”

Lotor’s body was stiff and his toes pointing up in the air as his heels skid across the floor not of his own will. “I never thought female birds were nymphomaniacs, but you proved me wrong, Saoche, you proved me wrong.” The busy castle corridor was interrupted by a telekinetically thrown Prince of Dhm. He felt his body fall into something tough and smooth, but with little bumps at an angle. Pulling his buried face out, Lotor saw a golden-tinged green scale chest with beads come into focus. “Now why does that look so familiar?” he wondered aloud.

An angry grunt from above was followed by the seizing of his right ear. He was slowly encouraged to get up on his feet. He managed to look upwards and soon knew why his landing place looked like he knew it. *Better try the old charm this time.* Flashing his brightest and sexiest smile, he crooned, “Sorry about that Jepaya.”

Jepaya sniffed imperiously. *I do not know what this fool is trying to say, but from the looks of his teeth, I would not doubt he is trying to dissuade me.* “Allura...now,” she spoke gutturally, straining the muscles in her throat to generate the words.

“That’s actually where I was going to head off, so there is no need for you to escort me...OUCH!” Lotor began to explain, gambling with the chance that she may understand some Standard English after all before she tugged impatiently on his ear as she led the way.

He stood next to Blue Lion. Despite his immense stature, he was dwarfed by its size. King Zarkon had found himself walking back and forth past the hangar where it was kept several times, often making excuses to check the ships and available weapons and defenses. Other times he was calling security images on the various terminals he found himself at. Now he was a step away from the machine, and he had no idea how he had brought himself there.

*It would figure a robot that draws power from water would hypnotize me, he thought with self-deprecation. He crossed his arms as he studied the exterior of the vehicle. He took a step forward. But why a Lion? What does a lion have to do with the element of water? A fish, yeah, a bird, possible if it were one that spent most of its time on the ocean or lake surface...hell, even a frog or a mayfly...but a Lion?! he mused. Further evidence of inbreeding in the Arusian royal family, he snickered. Sighing with delight, his hand tapped his lips as he felt the urge to touch the Blue Lion. After being denied this opportunity years ago, I may as well find out if it can overpower Grndm's curse; see if my attacks on Arus were worth the cost.*

He felt the waves of energy coax him nearer and nearer, more powerful than any drug he had ever consumed before. This bordered on a need that called to his elemental soul, or what was left of it. It was maddening, and the decision he had made to make physical contact with the device only made the coveting more potent. He moved his arm forward, thrusting his fingers out at wide arcs as he prepared to touch the Blue Lion's front leg. In these tiny moments of time, there was no King Zarkon. There were no plans of revenge or destruction. There was only an exiled, deprived, starving water spirit seconds away from being exonerated. Just another slight move of the fingers and the connection would be made.

“Do not taint the Lion, Zarkon!” a voice boomed throughout the hangar.

The water spirit regained its earthbound memories, and Zarkon was once more thinking with a strong calculating mind. He did not bother to look around like a fool. Let the creature who dared command him step forth. As he had expected, the orator did materialize before him, but not in the matter he had figured – it was literal. The apparition of the late King Alfor glittered in front of him, blocking his way to the Blue Lion.

Zarkon stepped back, his eyes narrowing. “And you are?” he regarded the phantom with curiosity and disdain.

“You killed me nine years ago...”

Zarkon clicked his tongue. “I am afraid you will have to be more specific than that. I killed many pathetic cretins nine years ago,” he began plainly.

“Zohar...” the specter warbled.

“Ah, so you are the late King of Arus, the one whom I personally splattered about the Valley of Zohar. May I say you have done a wonderful job of putting yourself back together in the afterlife,” Zarkon bowed regally, mocking fearlessly.

“I warn you, Zarkon,” Alfor moaned. “Do not touch the Lion...”

Zarkon frowned. “And why not?!” he nearly shouted as he threw his hand up. “Why should I heed the words of a dead man? You were not compassionate to my boon a decade ago.”

The spectral visage of Alfor scowled, indicating discontent. “Your demands were unreasonable.”

“Hmph, and they aren’t now?” Zarkon snarled. “All of this could have been avoided. Arus could have been left alone, happy and under my protection. You would have been king, your happy little wife would have danced with your happy little girl to their heart’s content. The rest of the galaxy would be attained through typically brutal political methods but Arus would be no worse for bear. And all you had to do was disclose the elemental technology. That was all I asked for.”

“In good conscience I could not let you regain what you lost. It was a blessing to the Universe...”

“Really? Did you and your stupid council think I would languish in a dark corner, full of self-pity? Hah! You saw what that stupid logic did for the Denubian; people do not even recall the days where my presence brought forth storms and floods. They think of such things when they think of Hagar. But, that is not what angers me most,” Zarkon spat as his eyes glowed brilliantly livid. His raised hand was now a shaking fist.

“Now you know how it feels to lose someone you love and be powerless to save them,” Alfor observed.

“May your soul be cursed to wander forever until it is ripped apart by Vajel Hiermsel!” Zarkon cursed as he lunged forward, trying to pass through Alfor to touch Blue Lion.

“NO!” Alfor cried out as a massive spiritual force flung Zarkon away before he could touch it. He rubbed his head as he groaned and stood up. The apparition faded away into fading strips of mist as Alfor reiterated, “Do not taint the Lion.”

“Very well,” Zarkon replied as he smoothed out the draping fabric he wore. He adjusted his sleeves as he continued, “if you want to keep doing things the painful way,” he tightened the beige cloth covering his head, “then so shall I.”



**Twenty: Shards**

*Having a conscience sucks.* Saoche leaned against the glass pane overlooking the barren courtyard of the castle, grumbling incoherently. Her countenance was a troubled one, as she mindlessly rubbed her feet. Her gray feathers puffed out as the intensity of her emotions made her body feel stranded on a sunspot. She sighed, and immediately started slapping the window and kicking her feet in a silent tantrum. “Unnnh! I hate this stupid feeling!” she whined out loud as she protested physically in the manner of a human toddler. “Thanks Vajel,” she spoke to the air, “you could have at the very least prevented a descendant like me from mutating guilt. Thanks a mil, self-righteous punk amoeba,” she cursed her fury.

*I should NOT have to deal with this. I was following orders. I’ve known Reyk my entire life, and he’s known my ancestors way back when they were Vajel’s Passers! Hell, even Zarkon’s known a few of them, and I manage a third of his finances! My mind should be clear: I should be friggin’ thrilled that everything went according to plan, so why do I feel like such a scumbag?* She began tapping the floor with her fingers. A tinkering echo rippled through the air. “Maybe if I paid Allura a visit,” she reasoned aloud, “there will be something about her I can hate so this terrible affliction I have will die.” Renewed by her decision, Saoche lunged into the air, heading for the doorway. A quick telekinetic command activated the metal doors, which slid apart and were soon left behind.

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“Something is wrong. What has happened to you?” Lotor held Allura in his strong, muscular arms. His embrace was the most tender gesture he knew he would ever make. He had dreamed fantasies that started with similar contact that always indulged his libido and lonely heart and ended with more passionate displays of affection. In the past, he could never have gotten so close to his beautiful love without her resistance. It confused him, frustrated him, but never deterred him.

It was the fact that she did nothing in his arms now that bothered him so. She did not squirm. She did not struggle. She did not hug him back. She did not smile. It was as though she had no spirit.

Lotor released her, and took a few steps back. His face was ripped apart with worrisome wrinkles that distorted his visage into something terrifying to behold. Still, Allura looked at him blankly.

“Well, will you answer me at least?” Lotor asked impatiently. “What has become of you?”

Allura shrugged. “I do not know what you mean.” Her mind was empty of emotion, as she regarded him coldly with her blue eyes. Her poise was dignified and stoic. Some part of her begged to stir, but she could not understand why. Lotor was simply the son of a despot, the most crooked of politicians, and one could not afford to consider him as anything more than a formality. “I am Allura, Princess of Arus, and you are Prince Lotor of Dhm. Your forces captured me, and here I am.” She stood up straight, and looked into his eyes with strength bereft of feminine softness. “I suppose you wish to propose a marital union of some sort. It would be best for all if we spent most of our time in our respective realms away from each other...”

Lotor waved his hand across his vintage point of her mouth. “Wait just a minute. You, are proposing marriage, to me?”

Allura crossed her arms as she nodded, her stare unwavering. Its power startled Lotor in its unbiased potency. It was mechanical in its steeliness, and lacked any emotion at all. “Political reasons, and nothing more. Honestly, Lotor, your harem is known throughout the galaxy. I doubt my blond persona can outsex seventy trained concubines.”

Lotor's mouth dropped. He was disappointed that he did not hear his jaw hit the floor, he was so shocked. Ironically, despite the idea of marriage never being so close to fruition before, he adamantly refused to carry it out this time. "There IS something wrong with you!" he shouted. He grabbed Allura by her shoulders, shaking her.

She seemed perturbed as she mumbled, "What are you..."

"Allura! Allura! This isn't you! Who did this to you? I'll kill them! I'll find out who did this to you, and I'll kill them!"

"Of course it is me," she stated plainly. "And nobody did anything to me. You are taking this situation entirely too personally. After all, I am the one who was abducted; it is I who should be outraged. Now release me, please, before you make a mockery of yourself."

Lotor's mental image of his precious, innocent, pure, and ethereal Allura was being slammed with an invisible force that sent waves of power through it, trying to tear it asunder. He squeezed his eyes shut, and held Allura tightly. A single teardrop slipped from his right eyelid and careened down his high cheekbone.

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In the ceiling's air duct, Saoche wiped a tear from her own eye, and knew what she had to do. She soon found herself in Reyk's presence as she wanted to know if he was already aware of her decision. He was sitting in his Dhmk guise, applying some final adjustments to his phaser rifle. "I have been expecting you," he simply uttered as he examined his most recent tweaking effects in the halide light.

Saoche shuffled her feet. "I have to, y'know. Can't really explain why, even to myself."

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Reyk placed the weapon gently on the table. He lightly tapped the tabletop with his palm. The blue sodium light cast a mollifying glow. “You can come closer, I won’t bite.” Saoche eagerly flew to the table and landed with haste. “But, I’m sure I can get some business advantages outta this, too,” she added with some relief, “so, it’s okay.” She cast an uneasy smile that exposed her gritting teeth.

Reyk placed an elbow upright on the table, and placed his chin in the palm of his hand. “I am sure you can,” he agreed. “Business is business after all. Best not to take one side, but play both ends of the field. Usually the best businessperson has no conscience to cloud administrative judgment.” Reyk then cast her a reassuring smile. “But, is the Passer gaining such a conscience?”

Saoche placed her winged forearms on her sides. “It ain’t clouding shit,” she denied disdainfully. “I still love money more than anything else in this whole Universe! I love to manage it, count it, hold it in its many forms. Even when it’s electronic, it gives me such a buzz!

“Ah, so it would seem,” Reyk tapped his chin with a finger as he deeply pondered the dilemma.

Saoche sighed, “Look, I don’t wanna screw you over. If you tell me to cut the crap, I’ll start snipping. So go ahead. What do you want me to do? You’re the time seer after all.”

“You know I am more than that,” Reyk protested. He pats her crested head. “I am your friend.” Saoche was surprised to find that she had shut her eyes after making her case. At the sound of his voice, they sprung open again. “While I can only see up to five minutes in the future at any given time, I have an idea of where you are heading. Be careful, be discreet...and be thankful Shai cannot read cybernetic minds.”

Saoche raced up to Reyk's head and planted a large grateful kiss on his lips. "MMMMswha," the smooch's sound was emitted as Saoche mentioned one more thing that came across her mind. "What about Zarkon? He's gonna be pissed off."

"My number one rule: no favoritism," Reyk preached as he sat with his back straight. "I will not suggest that Zarkon's designs are more important than yours, even if they are diametric opposites. Besides, I have known him well enough to expect that he already has alternative plans in store for something like this to go wrong. I even know that he has often manipulated me in schemes and somehow emerges unscathed and sparing me while I am none the wiser...and I'm the one who can see through the past and present!"

"I bet he gave you headaches if you had to do that time stuff constantly," Saoche supposed.

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"Migraines," Reyk admitted.

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Saoche had taken Reyk's advice to heart. The idea of distance and stealth was not lost to her. She manipulated her nanocells into an infrared mode to augment her vision. *I wonder if the old school could do somethin' like this with enzymes?* She mused silently as she looked through the walls for her target. The warm silhouette of an anthropomorphic feline with colder horns came into view. "Bingo," she mouthed without a sound as she navigated herself into range.

She settled in the floor directly beneath Shai's feet, and began one final upgrade to her eyes. With her telescoping retina, she easily located the two amulets in a thick chain wrapped several times around her neck. With the infrared, she could see a fascinating

gradient of heat streaming from them, contrasting with the constant flame of the woman's fast metabolism. Saoche saw another warm shape approaching, this one broader and a shade cooler. She heard the deep voice and cringed. *Damn it! It's Zarkon!*

"So, is she swooning into his arms yet?" Zarkon asked Shai concerning Allura.

"No swooning. Not anything. There was naught left but apathy," Shai stated apologetically.

He grinned happily. "Heh, don't sound so upset. This will be the ultimate detox for my son. You can't have reverse psychology in play if there's no mind with the ante." He chuckled as a testament to his pleasure at the news.

*Okay, on the count of three, I telekinetically break the charms. One...Two...*  
Saoche counted in her mind.

Zarkon's eyes widened as the crystals around Shai's neck abruptly shattered. Shai gasped and shielded her eyes as the splintered remains fell to the metal floor. The sound of countless pin drops filled the corridor's air, followed by a weary sigh. She opened her eyes to witness Zarkon reach under his cape and reveal the hilt of his laser slasher.

"I'll be waiting for you-know-who in the throne room."

Shai nodded as she telepathically alerted Jepaya and the guards to be on alert.

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"You cur!" Allura shouted as she fiercely slapped Lotor in the face. "Let go of me!"

Lotor blinked his eyes, stupefied. He felt as though he were released from a trance. “Allura! You’re back!!” Lotor hugged Allura and swung her through the air.

“I said let go of me!” she shouted as she flailed her arms and legs.

“That’s right, let it all out, it’s okay...”

“What is wrong with you, Lotor?!”

“Oh, nothing,” Lotor said as he gently lowered her feet to the ground. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go kill my father now. He tried to make me all loyal and sycophantic, but the joke’s on him! Buh-bye! I’ll bring you his head for stealing your soul!”

“Can you please tell me what is going on?!” she shouted, but Lotor had already left her alone in the room.

**Twenty-One: Way of the Warrior**

Allura hurried to the hangar, using the directions Saoche had scratched on a piece of plating for her. Her entire ordeal was exhausting her, and the more she tried to figure out the insanity, the more it fatigued her. *I can't believe I was put under some mind controlling spell! Saoche said she was put under one as well, and that's why she did what she did to me. And Lotor...* her thoughts trailed off as she remembered the embrace of the blue prince. Although the idea of him being so close to her like that made her ill, she could not dismiss the newfound doubt she had regarding his persona. *When I was in that state, he could have done anything he wanted with me...but he didn't.* She bit her lip as she brooded over what this could mean, hiding behind a statue of His Majesty when a pair of patrolling guards marched by. Thankfully for Allura, the sculpture was exact in its dimensions to King Zarkon, and hid her entire frame with room to spare. The guards pivoted at the corner, and moved into the next corridor. She crept away from her hiding place and ran as fast as she could into the hangar.

*Well, I can't think about him now, not when Blue Lion's before me!* she concluded, looking lovingly up at her brilliantly colored robot. She was startled at the movement she saw on the head, and her feelings sank into a pit of dread. She would not retrieve Blue Lion so easily.

Jepaya leaped from the metallic cranium. Her fluid movements were threatening, hinting of her fighting skill. Allura took a step back as the long train of skin between the Sapientydans' neck and shoulders settled.

*No time for words or petty translating. Let my actions be my voice!* Jepaya decided as she aimed her long staff at the human princess. A circular laser projectile shot out from its apex, humming towards Allura. She lunged to the side, dodging enough of the attack to spare herself serious damage, hissing as it grazed her right biceps. She did not her eyes off of her opponent for a moment.

*Impressive, pink monkey, but ultimately futile*, Jepaya mused smugly. *Still, I do not mind watching you dance a bit before I kill you*. She fired several more shots in a quick succession, not aiming for vital organs or arteries. In spite of herself, she was quite surprised by the woman's lithe sidestepping, and wondered, *Perhaps the helpless routine is truly a clever ruse after all. Very well, you have earned a suitable death from my blade*.

Allura shivered as she witnessed a laser blade suddenly generate from the eerily silent saurian. The staff was transformed into a scythe, a weapon that held a macabre connotation to its name she knew all too well. Jepaya skillfully weaved it about her body in elliptical arcs, her fingers adeptly maneuvering it like a loom shuttle. Without a breath of hesitation or any hint of transition from this showcasing, she advanced, swinging a lethal semicircle. Allura did her utmost to avoid this new move, and suffered a gash across her left thigh. It burned as it bled, an anomaly she had not anticipated from a laser weapon; a particle beam either cut or cauterized, but never in a perverse coexistence. The skin around the wound sizzled from the trauma as her blood oozed out. The warm stickiness soothed the screaming flesh. It was painful, but she knew it was not life threatening. *However, the next attack very well could be. If I can just make it to the Blue Lion...* she planned.

She was unable to develop the strategy further, for Jepaya knocked her off her feet with a quick tail whip. Sharp scales emerged from Jepaya's left palm as she pinned the princess to the floor. "Nnngh..." Allura strained against the strength holding her down.

*How I wish Lotor was here to see this*, Jepaya chuckled as she pushed harder into her prey's shoulder. Allura cried out as the scales punctured the suit and pierced her flesh. She grabbed her attacker's forearm and tried to push it away, but she was powerless in comparison. Nevertheless, she continued to struggle. Every movement on her part caused greater damage to her impaled shoulder. Desperate for something to alter her

disadvantageous position, Allura pleaded, "Please, you don't have to do this! You don't have to act like a blind slave for those bullies!"

Jepaya was taken aback. She had not understood all of the words shouted, but she had managed to learn "slave" in her brief time on this world. She released her hold on the girl and blinked a couple of times, as though a newfound clarity overcame her. Allura clutched her injury and sighed with relief at the truce.

Jepaya spit in her face. The unexpected action caused Allura to yell out. "How DARE you call me a slave of Zarkon! I am slave to no one, especially HIM!" She roared as she raised her weapon, its morbid blade kissing the air. Allura knew not what was spoken exactly, but she understood that her situation had drastically deteriorated. She was able to make out Jepaya's next word in a distorted, gruff form of English: "Die!" Allura squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the final blow.

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"I have been waiting, what took you?" Zarkon sat upon his throne in a lazy manner, his left foot idly tapping the dais. His gaze suggested an exasperated boredom as he beheld a fuming Lotor far below. The Crown Prince was agitated to say the least. His entire body trembled with his futile attempt to maintain a calculating demeanor. His teeth were clenched and bared a ferocity that bordered on madness. Their maniacal gleam contributed to the fearsome expression on his young face, one that stirred Zarkon's instincts.

As he had expected, the speed of his wayward son had the youth drawing his sword and stabbing his throne in one stroke with the blink of an eye.

"You missed." Zarkon uttered the criticism in a low voice, his eyes conveying a sense of disappointed scrutiny more so than anger at being attacked.

“How the...how are you doing that?!” Lotor exclaimed in disbelief. Indeed, his father’s torso was twisted to avoid his weapon, but did so at such a severe degree it suggested that the muscles and ligaments may have been ripped off of the old king’s bones. His hand now shook from dread.

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The mortal attack never came. Allura opened her eyes, happy yet confused why she was still alive. Rather than stand still and figure things out, she ran towards a tower of metal storage bins in a corner of the hangar. Once in that makeshift sanctuary, she turned her attention to seeing where Jepaya now was, and what had stifled her own death.

“Ecchai! What is the meaning of this?” Jepaya raged at the crimson guard who had often guarded Shai with her back on Apodia. “We have stood post together many times. Explain yourself!”

Ecchai displayed two sword hilts. A quick noise resembling a clap of thunder yielded a pair of black particle blades protruding from each hilt on the same side. Jepaya clenched her jaw. “So I see...” She trailed off as she prepared her own weapon, wiping the blood from her sliced cheek. She squeezed her neck skin, cut by the unforeseen attack, like a housemaid with a damp dishrag. Her dark maroon blood slapped with thick plops on to the metal floor. Her poise was unaffected.

“I had intended to remove your head,” Ecchai continued in the Sapientydan dialect, though her accent changed. “Were it not for that excess hide of yours, you would never have known you had perished.”

Jepaya’s eyes narrowed. “Since you have frequented Xandias long enough, you should be aware of my epithet.”

Ecchai raised her speckled chin defiantly. “Jepaya, Veneer-Killer of Xandias, Protector of the Great Meteriarch Shai,” she rehearsed, crooking a thin smirk. “And yet I was underneath your nostrils the entire time. Perhaps you should take to learning some magic to compensate for your failing’s fighter’s insight.” She pointed at the infuriated Sapientydan with her right double sword.

Jepaya retorted with posing of her own, holding her scythe over her shoulder. With a flick of her free arm’s wrist, she taunted, “Such bravado, when you will not even reveal you legless true self, Arydican.”

“Veneer-Killer, I do you no favors.”

“Hmph. Then I will remove your false ones myself.”

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Zarkon’s body released its tension much like a spring, using the force to propel his backhand with a terrific level of power. Lotor had still held the hilt of his sword in his rattling hand, and took it with him as he began a painful cascade down the stairs. Zarkon turned away from the scene, clenching his eyes at its familiarity with an event from long ago. He heard Lotor groaning, and opened his eyes. Peering over the stairs of his dais without standing up from his seat, he saw a bruised Lotor pulling himself up. The clever prince had used his blade to cease his tumbling by piercing the steps as he fell down; a trail of bisected carpet proved this. Blood trickled down his chin, the bright, crimson blood of a human being.

“You have impressive agility, Lotor, but you know nothing of sleight-of-hand. And all this time, I thought you were as double-jointed as I. Too bad for you. May your legs never fail you,” Zarkon raised from his position of authority and took slow, deliberate steps while his dumbfounded son hoisted himself up with the aid of his faithful weapon.

The murderous glare of the Prince was unchanged, despite his body being racked with pain.

“You...you transformed me into a puppet...you...bastard!”

Zarkon’s eyes glowed a blazing, penetrating violet. He grabbed his own hilt from underneath his black cape and brandished it horizontally. Two aquamarine lasers materialized at opposite ends, each several yards long. “I will never tolerate that word... from ANYONE!” he roared without his typical composure. “Do you understand?!” he shouted, before checking himself and taking a few long breaths. “No, I doubt you do,” he resumed in a calmer tone. He pulled his arm back, flexing and strengthening his frame as he prepared to launch his slasher. “But, why should you?” he continued. “And for the record, you make a better puppet than a Crown Prince.” A cacophonous chord burst from his mouth that ended in a demonic howl as he flung his weapon. It spun through the air, whirring as it burned the ether particles it severed into oblivion.

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With her voice finishing the threat, it possessed the chilling calm before the storm. Jepaya swung her formidable scythe abruptly from its rest on her shoulder. The laser slice flew off of its metal base, spinning with a whirring buzz. Ecchai caught the projectile in the twin beams of her right sword.

“Yah! Hah! Yah!” Jepaya cried out as she swung her ferocious scythe in a vortex of twisting and twirling lines. A flurry of whizzing purple blades cut through the air in all directions. A dozen sliced through the metal barges Allura was hiding behind. She cried out as metallic shards and shrapnel plummeted on top of her. The harsh clanging of larger debris mingled with the contrary jingling of smaller steel particles, but it was not enough to drown out a painful howl in the distance. Suddenly, a dull piece of cold material smacked into an area of her head not sheltered by her arms and hands, banishing her to the dark regions of unconsciousness.

Lotor instantaneously pulled his sword from its temporary sheath, curling into a ball as he rolled down the staircase, staying a hair's length ahead of his father's immense arsenal. Once on the floor, he sprang to his feet and launched into the air with all his might, flipping over the reciprocating slasher. The hilt landed smoothly into Zarkon's awaiting hand, which had the subtle visibility of an electric charge from Lotor's vantage point.

"Had I wanted you dead, boy, you would be splattered on my floor," Zarkon replied truthfully with contempt. "Be thankful that for some reason I still deem you worthy of existence." Lotor stumbled forward some as he completed his landing. He defiantly raised his chin as he met the gaze of the source of his enmity. Zarkon chuckled as he descended the dais, alternating his favorite weapon between his hands, showcasing his prowess. Lotor had never seen nor heard of such a melee device before. It resembled a glorified, straightened boomerang, but one far more malicious and capable of great destruction, the extent of which was yet to be determined.

*It would figure MY old man would use something no one's ever bothered to invent before,* the Prince thought dryly. "Why do that to me? Must you always demean me in order to tolerate you?!" he shouted out.

"Hmph. Do not play innocent. You look foolish, especially when you attempt to pass it off on me," Zarkon spat. "Who tried to poison who? Who challenged my throne by way of a duel? Who conspired with the Drules and ousted me? Look at the reflection cast in the pool of your blood for the answer, and then dare claim innocuous intentions."

As his father spoke these dire words, Lotor felt the pit of his stomach grow denser as though it were a black hole trying to suck his entire form into it in a grisly demise. *I should not care, I should not care!* Lotor's inner voice screamed. *Do not listen! Who is*

*he to rationalize and administer guilt when he is guiltier than I'll ever be! His stare wavered as he concluded morosely, Damn it, I cannot argue with that hateful fool's logic. Once again, he concocts a web of spite and vileness to trap me under his foot. If I go willingly, I must vow...vow to find a way to incapacitate him once and for all. No matter how long it takes, no matter how much bile I must swallow, I will win this war, father. Take this battle's victory for now and feed you hungry ego's gullet. I will wait in the shadows, and when I find your anathema, your weakest point, I will strike you and see you crumble before me.* Once his train of thought was complete, Lotor verbally reconciled in a different manner. "If you allow me back into servitude, will I still be your heir?"

"You have a one-track mind, don't you?" Zarkon smirked, though he was quick to observe the change in his son. *Trying to jade me, are you?* he pondered. *As usual, you assume too little of me. Will you ever learn to assess me correctly, or will you always take me for a fool? Ah yes, this question always intrigues me my son, and sustains me even as your black heart tries in vain to overpower mine. You are coddled compared to me...and it is my greatest mistake.* His weapon returned to its inactive state as a lonely hilt. "Will you still be the commander of DhM's fleet?"

"But what of Allura? What of Arus? Any chance that I..." Lotor began hopefully.

"Now it is a matter of principle. Ultimately I will have Arus, and the only acceptable way at this point is by force. If you are implying the use of diplomacy, you shall never do so with Arus or Allura. You will look weak to your contemporaries and to history. I am certain you do not wish to be committed to posterity in such a disgraceful way."

Lotor's warmonger intellect eagerly agreed wholeheartedly with the impeccable logic, but his heart felt heavy with sadness. *Allura's love, or Father's weakness; which do I want to take more?* "Fine. I will obtain her by other means when Arus is ours."

On the distant wall that witnessed all, a ripple of the pattern could be discerned for an instant if someone was watching. *Foolish Lotor*, Shai chided sadly as she shook her head. *Your solution for both relationships is one and the same.*

A sudden explosion behind her thrust her forward from its power. Shards of glittering silicon-laced walls and cold granite rock flew wildly around her, mediocre confetti. It took only a small moment of time for her to invoke her levitating ability. Whispering a chorded incantation, and invisible force field surrounded her floating body, protecting her from any physical harm by will of the spirits.

A zooming hum traced her path as she rushed to the aid of the royal family. With a concerned hand on each male shoulder, her protection and flight engulfed Lotor and Zarkon as well. The triad looked upward at the roaring face of Yellow Lion.

Zarkon growled. "Give me some room," he advised. She nodded, and moved a distance behind him. She no longer touched him, but her abilities were such that her spells still resonated in his lone body. He quickly readied his slasher, charging it with a large amount of energy from his skin, electrifyingly visual in its magnitude. He thrust it without a word. The span of the blades expanded upon its release and twisted through the air as a vicious, unavoidable, cosmic buzz saw. Zarkon nodded as he observed his target- the left forepaw- get shorn from its mechanical limb. Bereft of balance without a chance to compensate with a thruster, Yellow Lion fell on its side with a resounding crash. The collapse permitted a most strategic escape for them.

*Jepaya, we have intruders*, Shai sent the message telepathically as she raced her family to the laboratory.

*I am moments away from dealing a Veneer the final blow*, Jepaya answered back.

*If the Veneer's death is inevitable as is, leave it be, and meet me at the Laboratory in haste. The Voltron Force has pierced through our defenses, Shai explained.*

*Pierced through OUR defenses! I suspect there is a Veneer with them as well, Jepaya determined.*

Shai was grim. While a significant fraction of her armada was in this part of the Denubian, it was at the present securing the various worlds of Zarkon's empire that had since been under the Galaxy Alliance's jurisdiction. The remainder of her armada was busy with Planet Opachre's annexation, a priority surpassing all others once Dhm had been reclaimed. Defeating humans and Drules was so far a successful endeavor, she was well aware of the peculiar bionic facsimiles that were the Robot Lions. She found them repulsive and insulting to her heritage. The Lions were bastardized caricatures to her, yet she did not want her bias to underestimate them. Now, it seemed her forces stationed here were outmatched, and it was not due to technological advantages on the Lions' part. She concurred with Jepaya; a Veneer must be among them, and a powerful one. If she was correct about this Veneer having special Arydican techniques, than it was of an Essentian grade, and she was the main target.

Shai was all too happy to oblige...her armada had some surprises left.

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Allura was nudged awake. She moaned as she cupped her throbbing skull. "Unnh...where...where is..." She opened her eyes and was greeted with a gruesome sight.

Ecchai gripped her slashed chest as she felt her life seeping out of her mortal wounds. Beneath her serpentine torso was a bleeding stump through which varied viscera and fluids poured from, littering the floor in a viscous gel. With her free hand, she pointed to the robotic Lion that the now-absent Jepaya had been preventing the human female from

approaching. “Go...prevent victory of...Xandias. You have...Arydican blessing. My Veneer...stripped...life forfeit. Go...” she managed between labored gasps.

Allura could not comprehend the language spoken, but the tone was that of a warrior who knew her last living moments were passing by all too quickly. “You need medical attention. I will take you with me! You will get treatment!” Allura shouted, tears in her eyes.

Ecchai sensed the desire to help her from the pale monarch. Perhaps there was a need to reward her actions? Could they only speak the same tongue, Ecchai would tell the small creature that she had never expected any greater reward in her service than to give her life to preserve the Arydican way of life. That was the purpose of a Veneer, a being of espionage, who must kill in secret or be killed. Now the latter was imminent from being reality, and she was ready to perform her final act of fealty. “They cannot know...my bloodline...” she forced out as she choked on her thick blood. She pointed to a small spot on the nape of her neck. Allura noticed the gleaming metal and sadly understood the intention. She nodded and bowed before running to the Blue Lion.

It was a wonderful feeling to be sitting in the cockpit of her beloved Lion again, but the reunion was not to be savored now. She started the thrusters and it sprang to mechanical life. She shot a hole in the hangar’s wall and took to the Dhmk sky, but it was not far enough without hearing and feeling the force of the explosive her savior had just detonated.

In times past, she would have cried, but today she held back her sorrow. The serpentine hero had bravely welcomed death as a soldier without remorse or self-pity. She could only honor the unknown warrior’s memory by being strong and triumphant.



## **Twenty-Two: Final Battle Preparations**

“Hunk! Hunk! Answer!”

Hunk groaned in response to Pidge’s scared voice over the speaker. He rubbed his head. “What happened, Hunk?!”

He sat up in his cockpit seat gingerly pressing the bruised half of his forehead. Wincing, he replied, “I dunno. I think Zarkon threw a chainsaw at my Lion...”

“I think you may have another concussion there,” Lance’s voice chimed in. “Seriously though, gravity’s gonna give you hell without that leg to support ya, so use the thrusters instead until we get back to Arus. And make it snappy; we have our hands full.”

*So, something DID happen to my Lion,* Hunk vaguely recalled. He could have sworn he saw Zarkon launch something at the Lion. *How many more times am I going to receive traumatic blows to my head fighting these Dhm jerks?!* he pondered angrily. It was just then that he realized he was not falling out his chair. “Wait, why am I not falling out of my chair then?” he reiterated, this time verbally. “The last thing I remember was Yellow Lion falling on its side...”

“My Lion is propping yours up,” Pidge explained. “You will be very happy with this other piece of news: Allura is back with Blue Lion! She escaped, isn’t that great?” he proclaimed boisterously.

Hunk clasped his fist. “Yes! Now we can form Voltron! Ow,” he grimaced as the excitement created a painful jolt in his head.

“Yes, there is a very powerful robeast loose. The others are keeping it occupied for now,” Ana joined the conversation as she leaned on Pidge’s shoulder. “But, this is one battle I have to refrain from,” she mentioned suddenly.

Hunk heard Pidge’s confused protest. “Ana, wait, what do you mean?” he asked her over the speaker.

“If you desire closure, meet me outside your Lion. But first, put your thrusters on so Pidge can leave and rejoin the others.” Pidge could be seen shrugging on the console screen. Hunk complied, and had the Yellow Lion level on its own within the minute.

“Go on ahead, Pidge,” Hunk stated. “I’ll catch up.” The young pilot gave an uneasy wave goodbye before speeding off. Hunk closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Slowly standing up from the seat, he activated the exit hatch. He looked out and saw that Ana was waiting in front of the Lion’s mouth. Her eyes were dark, her normally smiling lips a straight line, an unwavering sense of duty coursing through every feature of her kind face.

“Ana?” Hunk asked with worry. She turned her head, responding to his concern with a cold smile. “You have a generous and honest heart, Hunk. You will raise some fine children someday. Find yourself a strong human woman to take care of you, ‘kay?”

At the mention of having a family, Hunk blushed. It was flattery but undoubtedly the strangest compliment he had ever received. The words possessed finality in their tone that bothered him. *But I want a strong Ana to take care of me!* his heart screamed to his soul. “You’re speaking to me as though you’re never going to see me again,” his voice raised in a vigilant tone.

Ana nodded. “That is most likely. I have a task that I was sent to do, and the opportunity to fulfill it is now. My next mission will be far from here, from Arus...from you, and this is the first time during any mission I have felt this type of...regret, I believe

is the apt word.” She reached into the large satchet attached to her belt, removing two hilts. Hunk’s eyebrow arched. *Hilts without blades? Hmm...unless they are retractable?* Four lasers of orange sienna burst forth to answer his thoughts, and he jumped back.

“Whoa! I’ve NEVER seen a double-bladed sword on the same side of the hilt before!” he shouted. “Is that a sort of Arusian martial weapon?”

Ana chuckled as she shook her head. “No, these are definitely not designed by any human. Granted, I should not even allow you to see them, but...I wished to give you a parting gift of some sort. Entrusting the identity of these weapons to another is a sacred bond of trust. Tell no one of them; this is meant only for you, understand?” Her voice ceased with a morose tone. She had come to find this male rather amicable. Using her carefree side as part of her undercover mission was a welcome change to the stoic demeanor she was forced to wear by her exalted position. Upon meeting Hunk, she had decided that were survive through her tenure, she would choose mates with his disposition to make exemplary fathers for the concept of propositioning Hunk for procreation was absolutely impossible and against her society’s dogma.

“I...I won’t tell anyone, Ana,” he began, “but, please, PLEASE, whatever you are about to do, don’t do it alone! Let me help you!” he pleaded as he offered his assistance towards her enigmatic battle. She again shook her head. “I am coming with you, Ana, and that’s that!” Hunk exclaimed firmly as he advanced towards her.

“Halt!” she commanded, holding her right arm straight at him, the orange sword gleaming. The ground around his feet rattled as Hunk wobbled. He instinctively looked down at the floor. Clawed hands of metal and stone grabbed his calves.

“Nnngh! Enngh!” he struggled as he tried to wrest his limbs free. When that failed, he attempted to punch through the mineral with his knuckles. Despite the considerable force he prepared himself for, the heat emanating from the manipulated earth was enough

to start his reflex and halt the move. *If this stuff is that hot, why hasn't my suit melted and my legs burned?* Hunk thought, the idea unsettling. *Not that I'm not happy to be okay...* he added.

“Ana, did you do this? Ana,” he repeated her name when there was no answer. He lifted his head, hoping to see her face. “Ana?” She had continued to her destination alone.

“ANAAA!!”

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“It looks like I’ve still got it!” Hagar swelled with pride at her newest creation, complete and ready for any adversary-especially one composed of five robot lions. Her smile was beaming, uncharacteristic of her swarthy nuances. “And, dare I say it, this is one of my best works.”

Cossack whispered to Reyk, “If I had a piece of gold for every time she’s said that, I would be able to buy a galaxy.” Reyk struggled to trap the laugh in his throat. Choking it down by feigning a cough, he brought his hand to his mouth to hide the unstoppable grin. His eyes held a twinkle in them that suggested something humorous was known. Hagar crossed her arms around her staff, tapping her foot as she narrowed her eyes at him. Reyk looked away. “It was him,” he admitted quickly, pointing at Cossack.

Arjuna finished his walk of the robeast’s perimeter just as a magically blasted Cossack flew past him. He whistled and ran his fingers through his black hairs. He pointed in the direction of Cossack’s trajectory. “Now, THAT really impressed me, Old Mother,” he mouthed.

Hagar frowned. “You don’t think much of the Hydra?” Arjuna sauntered up to her and turned around, pinching his chin as he assumed a deliberating, scrutinizing stance. “Hmm, mmhmm,” he muttered as he cocked his head at varying angles. “Uhhh...huh,” he

drawled out. Completing his survey, he looked intently at Hagar. His face was expressionless. “You know what I think?” his flat visage spoke. “I think...” he trailed off, turning his face slightly, “that Voltron is gonna have its robotic ass handed to it!!!” He whipped his head back, his multi-hued hair responding with a stiff backlash while his eyes were overflowing with glee. He grabbed Hagar and swirled her about. “We’re gonna win,” he chimed melodically. The witch cackled wholeheartedly, “You are such a cad, Arjuna. I’ve taught you well.”

“I am cool, I know,” he agreed. Hagar shook her head, though she could not help but find his comedic egotism charming time and time again.

Karna smiled as he approached from the other end of the Hydra with Yudishthira. “Arjuna, no victory dancing until AFTER Voltron is defeated,” he chided playfully.

A calmer Yudishthira replied, “I am rather apprehensive about launching this without an adequate field test.” Observing the sleek dark metal grafted into sundry spots, she frowned. “Are you certain the enzymatic compounds are compatible with lazon and Dhmk metals?” She looked inquisitively at Hagar and Reyk.

Reyk scratched his head. “I have been aware of the Apodian’s biotechnology for some time, but duplicating it independently has been haphazard thus far. There is no substitute for what they have achieved, but then again, Shai has given us assistance, and magic is in a class all its own. Thus, between Hagar, Karna, and myself- whatever shortcomings there may be in scientific and Apodian terms have been more than compensated for.”

“I do hope so,” Yudishthira revealed. She glanced upward at the monolithic serpentine robot that was countless multiples of her size. It was sleek with no indication of rivets anywhere on its body. At regular intervals there were dark bands of enzymatically enhanced metal, while the remainder gleamed in steel flares. The head of this mighty

marvel was smooth and homogenous in its black Apodian metal. Two pairs of circular eyes were located around it. The lower jaw hung open, appearing toothless due to their lazon generator being inactive now. When it was, nothing would be spared from that devastating bite. Yudishthira noted the sleek, minimalist look to its overt features, wondering if that was more Reyk's influence than Hagar's. *Hagar always prefers to have her creations look complex and compartmentalized. How did Reyk convince her to go the "less is more" route? Regardless, I am honored that they chose my idea for a robeast,* she smiled to herself as she recalled the tale of the Hydra, a serpent that began life with one head and ended it with one hundred. Every time a head was severed, two sprang up in its place. She had been enamored with that particular human myth, gleaned from the ancient books of her childhood. How her grandfather's library contained a book about human fables thousands of years old even before they migrated to the Denubian was still a mystery, and one she hoped to ask Reyk about someday. *The more you hack with that Blazing Sword, the stronger your enemy will become,* she challenged Voltron in her mind. She was roused from her thoughts by Reyk's growling.

"What is the matter?" Karna asked him. Reyk turned towards the lab's entrance as Shai, Lotor, and Zarkon flew in by Shai's spell. As their feet met the floor, Karna asked in a somber tone, "It's here, isn't it?"

"Not so fast, we still have Blue Lion," Arjuna reminded him. "Can't have Voltron without Blue, right, Reyk?" he asked for confirmation. When the response was a shaking head, Arjuna clenched his fists in sync with his teeth. "Damn them all! I thought Jepaya was supposed to care o' that, Lady Shai!" he shouted desperately at her. At that cue, Jepaya marched in, decorated with the abstract portrait from her blood and a deceased Ecchai.

"I know Allura did not do that," Zarkon offered in a gruff tone to show his mild concern.

“There was a Veneer that Jepaya disposed of,” Shai explained. “However,” she added as she approached her, “I was not informed of any injuries you received,” she changed her focus to Jepaya. The warrior shrugged. “It is nothing, Great Meteriarch.”

“Sure it isn’t,” Zarkon replied icily to her in Sapientydan. As she glared at him, he continued, “You ARE aware that the Arusian princess commandeered the Blue Lion.” Her face was one of loathing surprise.

“But I... I thought the crates crushed her! There was no movement or moaning!” she stammered. She lowered her head. “I have failed.”

“Yes, you did,” he concurred patronizingly. Then he pats her on the shoulder. “For what it is worth, since I am in this whole situation to begin with, I guess in some minor way, I did once.”

“Did what?” Jepaya looked into his eyes, demanding a certain word from him to complete his confession.

“You know,” he answered with agitation as he crossed his arms. “Do not make me say it.”

She crooked a fanged, impish smile. “You...failed...” she enunciated in perfect Standard English. The Triplets heard the words and collectively gasped. Reyk rushed to Zarkon, expecting to restrain him as Shai shook her head at this latest battle of their rivalry. Hagar was having her guffaw stifled by a panicked Cossack covering her mouth.

“Now is not the time,” Reyk intercepted Zarkon. “The Hydra is ready for deployment. You can bond with your step-sister over this later.”

“Very well,” Zarkon conceded, casting a fierce sneer as he pivoted away from

Jepaya's smirk.

Shai nodded. "We cannot distract ourselves with squabbling now. Unity is a must. Now, let me see if I can sense any additional infiltrations." She closed her eyes, stretching out her arms. The long sleek sleeves draped down, pulled into a gold clasp dangling from each side. Her cape and clothes blew outward from an unknown wind centered at her solar plexus. A nimbus of blue light coursed over her in lightning branches. Quietly, everything settled as her aura's visibility faded. Opening her eyes, she frowned to Reyk. "I sense no Arydican here. I require your assistance."

Reyk nodded as he shifted through the present seconds of present time passing by. In his mind, his will shifted his awareness of different locations, functioning as a psychic surveillance system. He spotted a human girl, appearing no older than nineteen, running through corridors with Veneer blades. "Yes, there is a Veneer several corridors away, and she is in human form," he provided.

"This Veneer can block out my probing spirit; X!chre's paragon, I wager. I will handle this one myself," Shai announced as she started for the exit. Both Jepaya and Zarkon interrupted her egress.

"I will not permit this," the king protested, shaking his finger at her. "Let Jepaya handle this one also," he suggested in her native tongue. Jepaya nodded, "Allow me to rectify my previous aberration," she furthered.

"You are wounded," Shai replied in a motherly voice. "While you attest that your cuts are minor, I know that you have lost a great deal of blood. I do not desire to lose you. We have had enough unexpected events for one day," she said gently. Jepaya did feel fatigued and weary, but would never utter such things out loud, especially with Zarkon around. She smiled at the sagely, mental acuity of her beloved Great Meteriarch. It made her all the more willing to sacrifice her life.

“At the very least, let Hagar accompany you,” Zarkon sprang forth with an alternative strategy before Jepaya could affirm her opinion. In English, his words were powerful and confident in everyone’s ears. “Coba can sniff out the Veneer, relay it to Hagar, and lend you aid if you need it. How about it, Hagar? Can I entrust with this task?” Zarkon gestured to Hagar, his face subtly warning her not to refuse nor fail him in this if she wanted to stay alive herself.

*I would help Shai even if he didn’t shout the order,* Hagar grinned at Shai. “It would be just like old times, spell-sister.”

Shai smiled in turn and agreed. “Since you put it that way, Zarkon, I cannot do it any other way. Bravo; you have not lost your touch.”

### **Twenty-Three: Sandestorme Unleashed**

“Pulsar Cannon!” Keith shouted as Black Lion fired a powerful shot into the Hydra’s maw. He had expected it to roar and respond in an animalistic manner like Hagar’s prior robeasts always had. This particular model did not cry nor bellow, nor relinquish its coiled hold on Blue Lion. *No! Allura!* Keith thought in a panicked frenzy. *You have only been in this battle for a moment and you are already in danger!*

“Screw this,” Lance cursed as he activated Red Lion’s flame. With a leonic roar, a stream of blazing fire gushed forward, casting a fiery sheen on the Hydra’s metallic frame. It engulfed the section just above the incarcerating coil. The intense heat of this constant spew soon denatured the enzymes in the structure. The crushing coils loosened from the lack of commands, allowing Allura’s opportunistic escape.

“Thanks, Lance,” Allura gratefully spoke.

“Don’t thank me yet, Princess,” he replied cynically. “That attack used up most of my energy. I can’t pull that off again.”

As the Hydra’s temperature cooled, the enzymes reconfigured to their original structures, an interesting effect rarely, if ever, found in Nature. However, the robotic serpent did not resort to repeating its previous strategy. Instead, its eyes shot out a pair of green beams, blasting into Red Lion’s torso. “Arrgh!” Lance groaned as his cockpit clattered and the lights dimmed until all he could see was a green halo surrounding the exterior. His darkness was alleviated when an electric current surged through the interior and incidentally through the pilot. Lance squinted as his teeth chattered. His lower jaw rattled from the amps.

Green Lion entered the fray without warning. It latched onto the base of the Hydra’s neck with its extended claws, powerfully piercing through the enzymatic matrix,

providing an unshakable anchor for Pidge. The Lion's jaw weapon, a knife, was already generated. Pidge aimed directly for the Hydra's optics. The double-edged knife plunged mightily into the orbits, damaging the robeast's offensive gaze. Lance rebounded from his electrical pain, springing out of reach. The Hydra seemed to react in a lifelike manner now, thrashing its head to and fro in a vain attempt to dislodge the Green Lion.

"I owe ya," Lance thanked Pidge, "but where's Hunk? We need Voltron, and fast!"

"Well, the Yellow Lion's forepaw was severed, and he ran after Ana..." Pidge explained in labored clauses interspersed with pauses from the shuffling his body made in the seat.

"Wait, I thought Ana was with you," Lance's confused voice asked for clarity.

"She was, but she made me let her out to see if Hunk was okay. He was, and then she made me leave without her."

"How convenient," Lance drawled as he crossed his arms and grimaced.

"Can we assume Hunk will rejoin us soon?" Keith interrupted the volley. His tone was appropriate for the situation, namely that it was not the time for lengthy conversations.

*I hope so*, Pidge worried, but answered with a more delicate optimism. "Any minute now..."

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Ana intently used the shadows to her advantage as she neared the throne room. Her face bore no expression. Her stride was light, her arms tense, ready for action. She kept the blades ingenerated for the moment, lest she lose the element of surprise. This was

crucial to her success. After these months of undercover life as an Arusian maid, her skills would be put to this great task.

“Mrrroowwww,” a bodiless voice moaned behind her. She turned around, her right sword coming to life as she sliced empty air. There was no one behind her. She sniffed the air, trying to detect a living presence by scent. There was an odor, and it was directly beneath her feet. She looked down. A blue cat was sitting up on its hind legs, blinking its yellow eyes.

“Mrow?” Coba mewed to her. Ana hunched, narrowing her eyes. “Shai Sayenne, is that you?” she inquired with a smirk.

*Everyone wants to be me, I know, Coba answered as he yawned. Too bad for you that I found you. Now my witch knows you are here. Good luck, you will certainly need it.* He rubbed himself on her legs as he meowed goodbye. He sprinted off ahead to the throne room. Ana shook her head at her foolish assumption that Shai could possibly make herself as small as that creature.

A magical web materialized from a distant corner, trapping her within its glowing pink threads. She groaned as she struggled against them, gnashing her teeth. She heard a cackle emanate from the same corner. She lifted her head, fiercely demanding, “Who is there?!” Hagar continued to chuckle as she stepped forward, her mottled green face full of malicious glee. “Oh dearie, it looks like I have caught a spirited young woman...but what are you really?” the powerful enchantress snickered.

“So it begins,” Ana whispered, lowering her head. Her eyes closed, she tugged on the web with all of her physical strength. The magic would not give so easily, slicing into her flesh like glass shards. She grunted, but would not abate. She called upon her own magic, her techniques of Affinity, summoning the planet’s magma miles beneath her feet. It shot up around her, melting the web with ease. Hagar shielded her eyes, using her staff

to form a protective bubble around her and Coba, who had since decided to stay around and watch the spectacle. When Hagar looked back, the human known as Ana was no longer before her. Instead, Ana had used the distraction to transform into her true form. Her dark red scales still bled from the wounds Hagar's magic had inflicted. The skin about her neck was flattened in the manner of a cobra ready to inject its venom. Various tattoo markings formed distinctive patterns on the arms her true form retained, albeit longer and more sinuous. However, much like a serpent, there were no legs. What clothes she had been wearing as Ana had been burned away; now, only the Arydican Veneer Sandestorme remained.

“Shai Sayenne, no matter what form you take, it is futile. You will perish,” Sandestorme pronounced her intent as her weapons blazed to full power.

Hagar's laugh was hearty enough to worry her. “You think that I am Shai?” she giggled as she pointed to herself. “My my my, that is something...”

Sandestorme's eyes narrowed. “Enough!” She began her attacks, slicing the air with her swords, targeting Hagar's force field. None of her slashes weakened the shield, and Hagar's constant cackling only added to her chagrin.

“Is that all you have, naga?” Hagar spat. Her insult was retorted with a volcanic eruption two yards away, as Sandestorme retreated and summoned. She raised her hands to the ceiling, the lava following suit. “Nnnnnnnnnnnnngh! Lake of Tectonic,” she invoked in Arydican, lowering her arms to her eye level, commanding the molten earth to rush linear at Hagar. The power of the spell was more than Hagar had anticipated as it started eating through her barrier. Hagar increased her protective barrier with additional spells, calling on any water molecules present in the air to counter the fire aspect of the attack. *Okay, Shai, feel free to join the fun,* she thought impatiently.

An invisible blur distorting a small area of vision rushed across Sandestorme. She grunted as her throat bled from a quintet of cuts. With a quick thought, she generated small projections from her shoulders, wrapping around her neck to provide pressure. Her focus was lost, and the magma dropped to the ground, melting a trench in the floor. “So... you were a Veneer once...” she realized as Shai’s body faded into sight as a large panther shape. A golden vest analogous to her levitating cape covered her ribcage and back. The absence of cloth in this form was no anomaly; Shai always wore organic cloths or flexible polymers that could be temporarily rearranged during her shifts to provide extra mass and protection. Shai’s ears had a distinctive quality that merged caracal and elf anatomy. Her eyes now possessed a more pronounced almond shape than usual. Her brilliant blue fur was as dense as her horns were missing, and a biologist would notice that the Felinis had opposable digits as well. Her poise was an imminent pounce. Sandestorme extended her right arm. Stretching an inconceivable amount in human terms, it resembled rubber’s capacity to be pulled. Her finger extended along with her nails, becoming long daggers as she swiped at Shai.

Shai adeptly avoided the attack, her movements quicker in this state *I must also be more careful*, she reminded herself. *My body can take very little damage in this shape. But, my magic is also its strongest now.* Her eyes took on a blue nimbus as she chanted in an ancient tongue that only Hagar, also possessing Felinis blood, was schooled in. A corresponding azure mist appeared about Sandestorme. A portal began as a twinkle several feet above Sandestorme’s head, quickly enlarging into a massive spiritual gateway. Glints of spirits’ eyes and ghostly hands were visible in fleeting glimpses, twisting about her in a spinning vortex that emerged from the portal. Sandestorme refused to scream as the mist cut and pierced her body, ripping chunks of scaled skin with each revolution. She focused once more on the molten energy exposed from her earlier invocation, which formed a shell around her as it cooled. The steam from the cooling blocked the spirits’ path.

Shai began a different chant, dismissing the mist. Her medley changed its tempo again as she implored more powerful spirits to send their aid. The portal above

Sandestorme still persisting after the mist floated into it, dilated. Swirling metaphysical beings of a million unique colors to the Universe could be seen frolicking in the vast dimension the gateway led to. Blue drops, sharp as dirks, rained on the shield with hurricane force. Tiny cracks appeared in the shell, which germinated into long faults and crevices. The shell soon crumbled. Sandestorme rolled out towards Shai. Her arms had retracted to their usual length, but the boundary of where her hands ended and the sword hilts began was absent. Indeed, the fusion was a smooth transition from skin and muscle to four energy blades. Arching her back, craning her body several times Shai's present height, she thrust in vigorous succession. Shai dodged most of the stabs, but one grazed her hind legs. Not willing to suffer further from this *modus operandi*, she leaped onto Sandestorme's arms before launching into the air. She punched her in the face as she quickly landed in her Sapientydan form. Now at eye level, she could see the surprise in her opponent's eyes, and she knew the advantage was hers. Shai's palms generated spikes, adding more damage to her slaps as she cut the Veneer's face into a garish display of blood. Sandestorme grunted as her defenses failed. She faltered, pulling back. With one eye opened, she was sure death was upon her as Shai's wrists birthed gigantic spines. She saw them slice upward at her, and she painfully felt the projections covering her hurt neck falling away. Sandestorme collapsed onto the floor, twitching and clutching the crumbled remains of her lava shell. Shai transformed into her normal state of a hybrid between the two extremes she had wielded in this battle. The transition was smooth and silent with the exception of the subtle movement of skin and tendons beneath it.

"You never fail to impress me, Shai," Hagar clapped her praise. Shai gingerly touched the wound on her leg, its blood staining her cape and chiton that clothed her now. *A shame Zarkon's healing is sealed*, she sighed. Wincing, she then gestured to the fallen Sandestorme. "I think you could have handled her yourself. I believe you have gotten stronger in your years here in the Denubian. Now, to deal the final blow..." the hairs on her back tingled as her ear flicked back. She sensed a form to the side. "Hagar! There's another attacker!"

Hagar also sensed the power and fired a huge orb of light from her staff to block the adversary's trajectory. It exploded with a blinding light that rendered eyes useless for several seconds. *Well, that was unexpected; that bordered on positronic*, Hagar pondered. When eyesight was restored, both spell-sisters saw that the Arydican had vanished without even a pool of blood to hint she been there at all.

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"Saoche! What are you doing here, traitor!" Hunk shouted at her.

"Shut the hell up, this ain't the time," she dismissed his anger with an innocuous flick of her claws. "I'm on your side. Ask Allura; she was controlled by Shai and so was I...hey, that rhymed," she tapped her lower jaw as she considered the random event.

Hunk saw the floating body behind the avian and scrunched his eyebrows together. "Ummm...who is that?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. But, she's hurt real bad and needs medical care. You have emergency supplies, right? I can telekinetically keep pressure on her wounds and keep her alive, but barely, until we get to Arus...I think...but that does depend on how fast you can get us back to the others so you can form Voltron and get us the hell outta here!" Saoche howled as she flew up into Hunk's face.

"I'm not leaving until I find Ana," Hunk said defiantly. He crossed his arms.

"Look, I ain't gonna stall for time this gal doesn't have," Saoche bellowed. "Look, what if I told you I already found Ana, and Hagar cast a spell on her, cursing her to be a snake that is now hovering behind me!! Will that have you move your ass?!"

"Ana?" Hunk whispered in disbelief. The voice that replied with his name was deeper and unlike his Ana's voice. He inched closer to the badly wounded being, looking

down upon the slashed face. “Ana?” he reiterated. His eyes met an empty gaze; if he did not see the chest move, he would have thought she had expired. “It is you, isn’t it Ana?”

“Proof enough? Can we go now, please? I’m keeping her systems at bare minimum, so leave the poetry for the hospital bed on Arus, ‘kay?” Saoche prodded. Hunk nodded silently, hoisting Sandestorme in his arms. “Thanks, that gives me more resources to allocate to her condition,” she chirped.

“Follow me.” He looked down at the reptilian face. “Ana, I don’t know what happened to you, but please live so you can tell me...” He raced to where his three-pawed Yellow Lion waited, sending it into maximum speed as soon as all were aboard. He used his console devices to locate the other Lions, silently thanking his luck in piloting the fastest Lion.

## **Twenty-Four: Voltron vs. the Hydra**

“Activate Interlocks, Dynatherms connected, Infracells up, Megathrusters are GO!”

“Let’s go, Voltron Force!”

Indeed, the reunion of Hunk with the rest of the team meant that it was now finally possible to form Voltron. Keith checked the systems needed for the process by rote, as did the reciprocating others. They had since fallen into that familiar positioning. An electrical field surrounded the five lions at this time, protecting them during this merging process that was also their most vulnerable state, since they could not attack nor abort the formation once it began. *I always wonder if Alfor was aware of that and added the electrical field, or was it always there?* Keith thought as the Black Lion assumed the semblance of Voltron’s torso as its compartments straightened and the legs folded into compartments, hidden from view.

“Form feet and legs!” The heads of Blue Lion and Yellow Lion pivoted, creating a facsimile of feet and ankles; the perpendicular bodies now served as legs, as their own folded away to prevent obstruction. Even Yellow Lion’s damaged leg followed the procedure. Hunk sighed with relief that the upper half of that leg was still controllable.

“Form arms and body!” Red Lion and Green Lion were now ready to make contact with Black Lion’s arm sockets, making the connection in a simultaneous move with the Yellow and Blue Lion engulfing Black Lion’s feet.

“And I’ll form the head!” Keith exclaimed in the same pitch he always used for this line, one enthusiastic to deliver justice and punish the evil that they always bested. Black Lion’s jaws parted, and the noble robotic face of Voltron was visible to all. Surges of electrical power pulsed around the formed marvel as the pilots tested each of the joined

Lion's roaring capabilities, a good indicator that the transformation was successful. No matter how many times it was done or seen, it was awe-inspiring.

"I don't get it," Jepaya grumbled in her native tongue as she watched from the Dhm throne room's screen. "Why the degraded Felinis motif?" She turned to Shai. "Great Meteriarch, these creatures have made a comical abomination of your father's race, am I correct?"

"It would appear so," Shai confirmed, her brows bent in angry angles. "Although I think it was more of a primitive form of invocation that humans are prone to using."

Reyk nodded. "Yes, their ancestors had thought that by drawing or assuming forms like the animals they witnessed in their world, they could obtain some of it for themselves."

Shai frowned at the word 'animal'. Reyk quickly replied, "It sounds harsh, but anything not human and able to move on Earth was dubbed an animal."

Zarkon smirked as he replied, "Supremacy of one race...now where have I heard that one before? Well, at least Earth is still habitable; the Drules cannot even say that about their own dust ball of a planet. So, is the Hydra going to fight Voltron, or am I just going to watch it rust? Oh, wait...there comes the infamous Blazing Sword..." he groaned as the familiar blade that has cost his treasury billions generated, ready for implementation.

"What's wrong, little male, nervous about the big battle?" Jepaya teased him.

"Little?" Zarkon shot back as they quarreled in Sapientydan. "I am as big as you. Or did you forget that when Lotor kicked you in the head?" Jepaya grit her teeth and clenched her fist. Seeing that his quip worked, he added, "That's what eye-level generally

means. You better write that down, so you don't forget. Here, since I'm a bonafide Translator, I'll even write it for you phonetically."

*I want to punch him. I want to punch him!* She thought over and over. She turned away, knowing that in another second she would be making a fool of herself. *However, if I manage to beat him into a bloody pulp, it may well be worth the embarrassment.*

Shai put a mollifying hand on Jepaya. "It is best to remain calm now. The battle just got interesting," she announced as she gestured to the screen. Zarkon looked, and felt his second heart drop into the pit of his first stomach. The Hydra had been decapitated, and the head was flying away.

"Interesting, Shai? Is that your euphemism for losing?!"

"Relax, Zarkon," Reyk crooned. "Because of all of the busy work you've been doing, we kept you out of the loop on some of this robeast's specifications. It was designed to nullify Blazing Sword's attack."

Zarkon looked dully at him. "A flying brain case is nullifying Blazing Sword?"

"That simply initiates the specialty."

Zarkon rubbed his right temple as he surveyed the so-called specialty.

"Yay! We did it!" Pidge shouted.

"I think that's an all-time record for us," Lance boasted.

"Great! Now, let's get back to Arus, guys," Hunk added anxiously. Keith nodded. Once Hunk had rejoined, he had frantically told the whole sad story about Ana's fight with

Hagar, courtesy of Saoche's bending of the truth. And Saoche was exonerated once Allura mentioned that she was responsible for her escape as well.

"Look, let's crush these bastards while they're still weak, Keith!" Lance shouted. "If we go back to Arus, we'll have to deal with the Dhm fiasco all over again. All those people we helped free from slavery, all of the lives sacrificed, all of the planets destroyed, will have been for nothing!" The veins in his forehead were bulging, pulsing against the lined interior of his helmet.

"Sorry, Lance, but Voltron ain't a panacea this time," Saoche gloomily informed. "The reason why there aren't that many ships around here to fight is because they have all but secured Zarkon's former lands. Plus, they have Reyk, even if the Hydra is defeated, when it is defeated..."

Lance pounded the console. "Damn it, damn it, DAMN IT!"

Allura sighed, sadness claiming her voice. "So we have to fight again..." She then noticed something cryptic about Saoche's words. "What did you mean by 'if' it is defeated?"

Keith answered with dark insight, "I think that is what she means. The Hydra is not destroyed. Look, team."

The headless body of the Hydra generated an identical head from the enzymatic compounds in the neck. Reformed, the Hydra grabbed its swooned detached appendage. Using its coils, it positioned it so that its base touched the neck. Trillions of bonds were created. The Hydra had two heads, and was now twice as dangerous.

"Holy...crap..." Lance whimpered dumbfounded.

“Holy...crap...” Zarkon whispered. A broad smile showed that his cynicism was utterly defeated by the prospect of true victory.

“That’s my gramps, always eloquent,” Arjuna joked. He gave Yudishthira a playful headlock. “I never had doubt in you, Yudy. Your ideas ALWAYS work.”

“So, this was your doing, too?” Zarkon asked his eldest grandson. Yudishthira nodded. “I figured it was the only way to prevent Voltron from using its most powerful weapon. And if it does, it will make its defeat all the sooner. Of course, without the technological and magical expertise of your allies, this never would have been more than a thought.” She bowed. “I will always do what is within my power to serve my people and my family.”

“Here that, Lotor?” Zarkon mentioned to his son, who was eagerly observing the frantic and futile swinging of Voltron as more and more heads emerged on the Hydra. Zarkon noted the bloodlust on his face. He shook his head. “Never mind. It doesn’t surprise me that you didn’t,” he muttered.

“The Hydra is up to ten heads! Think they figured out by now the Blazing Sword is useless against the Hydra?” Karna laughed as he pointed to the writhing mass of heads. “I bet if Voltron could cry, it would be blubbering like a human babe by now,” Arjuna quipped.

“Okay, Lance, you can stop swinging now,” Pidge scolded his partner.

“Most people would have stopped after two or three heads popped up,” Saoche sneered. “But, that would have made it too easy, huh?”

“I was just making sure that the Blazing Sword couldn’t destroy it!”

Voltron dodged 16 out of 20 laser eye beams. The other four caught Voltron right on the torso. The shock coursed through all five lions. Everyone, save for Sandestorme and Saoche, cried out in a horrifying chord of screams.

“In the words of a long bygone era...DUH!” Saoche shouted. “Now, there is a weakness to this stupid thing. Did anybody ever read Ancient Greek mythology here?”

“Why would want to read stories written by Geeks?” Lance posed, honestly misinterpreting the name of the ancient human civilization.

“Forget it. You’ll hurt yourself,” Saoche dismissed her question. “Well, the Hydra in Greek myth always grew two heads for every one head that was chopped off. It was defeated when a certain Greek hero-whose name I will leave out so as not to confuse anyone – had his nephew cauterize the necks. This prevented any more heads from spurting out. That’s the essence of the tale. PLEASE tell me you can see the parallels in this one.”

“When I escaped the Hydra after Lance shot his fire attack, it was weakened for the moment,” Allura recalled. “But, Lance doesn’t have enough energy in the Red Lion to do that again...”

“Red Lion doesn’t...but Voltron does,” Keith smiled. “Team, I have an idea, but it’s risky. Everyone, get your oxygen masks on and turn the cooling systems on your suits to full blast.” Everybody was too desperate to outwardly complain, even Lance, save for Saoche who snarled, “Oh no, don’t ask if the bleeding snake or I need anything, we’re fine.”

“There’s an extra suit in a compartment back there in the lower left,” Hunk provided.

“You mean in this cabinet, behind all the junk food?” Saoche snickered, before she pulled it out.

“No...heat...me...best...” Sandestorme muttered out in labored English.

Saoche looked genuinely concerned. “Are you sure? I dunno...”

“Heat...affinity...me...high...help...live...”

“Okay, okay, but I’m still using the suit,” Saoche agreed as she wrapped the leggings around herself like a shawl. “Okay, let’s do this!!”

Keith began the commands to send all of the resources to generating heat in Voltron’s body. “Now, let the Hydra grab hold of us.”

“I sure hope you know what you are doing...” Lance said to Keith.

“What are they doing, committing suicide?!” Arjuna blurted out. “They just let the Hydra grab them!”

“Something is wrong,” Zarkon surmised. “They have a strategy. I have seen this happen before, and it has never ended well.”

“The Hydra...it’s...MELTING!!!!” Lotor shouted as he pointed at the screen.

“Voltron must have somehow generated immense heat in itself...but how can it do so without also melting?” Yudishthira wondered.

Shai’s face glowered with rage at being defeated, though her poise and demeanor remained unchanged. “The Vener.”

“What, the one you and Hagar supposedly killed?” Zarkon mentioned.

Hagar nodded. “The Veneer must be on Voltron, and her affinity for Magma, Fire and Earth, has been registered by Voltron’s occult components and exponentiated its threshold for heat tremendously,” Shai explained to the group.

*All the more reason for me to claim that damn robot someday, Zarkon thought to himself. As the Hydra’s remains bubbled away, raining to Dhm’s surface in blobs, he mused further. My instincts about Voltron have been accurate. That IS the key to breaking Grndm’s seal on me. He grinned. To the outsider, this would seem a defeat, but the Hydra has served its purpose in a manner far more rewarding to me.*

“Reyk, would you do the honors, please?” Zarkon asked. He turned, and saw that Reyk had already left.

“Now is it time to cheer?” Lance asked.

“Yup!” Keith uncharacteristically cheered as he reset the thresholds to normal. “I think it’s time to...”

A huge energy blast knocked Voltron several hundred kilometers further into the atmosphere. “Whoa! Whoa! Reverse thrusters!” Keith ordered. Voltron’s progression slowed. Keith saw a massive golden dragon straight out his childhood fairy tales heading straight for them all.

Reyk head butt the robot as he cast a time-speed spell to send it hurling away even faster than physics would normally allow.

“You have GOT to be kidding me,” Lance moaned. A tail whip hit Voltron almost completely out of Dhm’s atmosphere.

Reyk’s eyes glowed ultraviolet, so to the Voltron Force, they looked unchanged. Saoche gulped. *Dude, remember I’m IN here*, he thought to him.

Reyk’s breath came out not bearing fire, but a blue-purple energy crackling with lightning and electricity. It engulfed Voltron completely. “Polarity Reverse!” Reyk commanded, using his time-warping abilities to temporarily alter the planet’s magnetic poles. He had shot out similar charges to Voltron, but at the time, it had been a weaker opposite of Dhm’s. Now, the planet shared the exact same charge, and the repellant force pushed Voltron miles away from the planet’s orbit. The cockpits went into a chaotic display of lights, blackouts, and sounds, which then abruptly resumed their normal function.

Keith opened his eyes. He was greeted with outer space, and the dark orb of the Cosmos, Dhm, floating perilously ahead. He turned Voltron around. “Let’s go back,” he said somberly. “Ana needs care, and Voltron has only enough energy left to get us home.”

“Does this mean we...lost?” Pidge asked incredulously.

“I think destroying the Hydra bought you some time. That ‘dragon’ bought Zarkon some time. It’s a stalemate if anything,” Saoche offered as conciliation.

“No, Saoche, it isn’t,” Allura fought back tears. “Zarkon’s forces are stronger than ever, and these past few months have been erased.” She remembered the nameless warrior who had perished back on Dhm and steeled herself. “But, I will fight. I will not give them leave to hurt any more people. I have been called on to protect again by Fate, and so I shall...”

“We will fight with you, Allura,” Hunk replied. “We will not be leaving Arus after this. I’m sure the Galaxy Garrison will need Voltron now more than ever.”

“Arus is my home now because of you, Allura,” Pidge added. “I would never abandon you or it. We all fight together.”

“They can’t get away with this,” Lance spat. “You know I’m always ready to fight the good fight.”

“Yes, Princess, we are here for you,” Keith replied with absolute fealty in his heart.

## **Epilogue**

“You are leaving tomorrow?” Zarkon asked Shai in his private chambers. Shai was sitting in an opposite lounge chair ornate in bony decorations. She nodded. “Yes, with two Veneers being sent to kill me, it is evident I must return to Apodia and handle this with my presence.”

“I understand,” Zarkon nodded. He sighed, and sank back into his chair, letting his muscles loosen.

“I will leave some ships behind until your own fleet is fully built; the remainder of the enzyme compounds are also yours,” she detailed her parting gifts.

“Mmmm,” he mumbled, resting his chin.

“Considering all you went through to reclaim your Empire, I suppose your joining me is out of the question,” she added with a small smile.

He shook his head. “I have unfinished business here, you know that.”

They both fell silent as they looked away from each other. “It seems we always reach this dilemma whenever we say farewell,” she quietly provided. She looked at Zarkon to find he had since been staring at her as well.

“We both fought hard to earn our pride, and we have not used it all yet,” his deep voice permeated the air.

“Do you ever think about it, though?”

He sighed, and folded his hands as he leaned back. “Of course I do. Sometimes, I wonder about leaving it all behind. What that would be like. But in the end, I would end up in a similar situation on Apodia. The truth would come out. My destiny is to always fight for my right to exist; therefore, I will give up nothing. Neither will you, because you are in the same situation. But, you have a home, you have always had a home. I have had to make my own when I needed to rest. That is what is different between us.”

Shai sighed as she stood up. She walked towards the exit. “If His Majesty wishes to meet me in my chambers tonight...” she looked intently at him before the doors slid open and she left.

The next morning, Shai’s ships left. He did not watch them lift-off, did not see her leave his world. They had since said their goodbyes in the manner they always had in the past. What had to be done was done. He sat in his throne, knowing that in the coming weeks he would forsake his Apodian garb for his traditional robe and cape. Jewelers were already working on his new crown. He sighed as he thought of his grandchildren...and his son.

He had much to do.

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“Xiron!!! Xiron!!! I’m so happy to see you!” Saoche hollered as she leaped into Xiron’s outstretched arms. She planted kisses on his cheek.

“That’s one happy employee,” Lance joked. He focused his attention on Hunk. “How is Ana doing today?” he changed to a serious tone.

“With every passing day, she gets a little better. That’s why Saoche is leaving today...Ana insisted it. She seems troubled from all the trauma she went through, and

Hagar's spell is still...y'know...but she's strong. She has managed to joke about helping Nanny get over her fear of snakes soon," Hunk finished with an optimistic anecdote.

Lance laughed. "Ana is going to be all right."

Allura formally spoke with Xiron about the mission, and how Saoche had been more of a helper than a hostage.

Xiron scratched Saoche's head, who arched in the sheer pleasure of it, warbling. "I told you, Saoche is one-of-a-kind."

"That's for sure," Pidge smiled.

"In fact, for all of your efforts, I have humanitarian supplies for your people in my ships, plus some funds for your treasury. Saoche had mentioned in our recent transmissions that she would like to personally set up a Seer outpost here on Arus," Xiron revealed.

"Hey, I'm the CFO, remember? I know a good moolah-makin' opportunity when I sees it!" Saoche proclaimed to the world.

"Well, until then, I must head back to the Garrison. I postponed some meetings to be here today."

"We understand, Mr. Gyldenhjerte," Keith answered. "With Zarkon back in the picture, we will need all the help we can get."

Xiron nodded. "Take care, everyone. We shall speak together often in the coming months. Saoche, let us go."

“One sec,” she protested. She flew to Allura’s shoulder. “Thanks for believing in me.” She then landed square on Lance’s head before the Princess could reply. “And thank YOU for that lovely vacuous personality of yours. It kept my wit razor-sharp,” she snickered to him as he pouted. She pinched his cheeks. “You be a good boy while I’m gone,” she warned him. “I have a lot more songs to sing.” She gave him a light slap on the cheek and zoomed straight into the ship. Xiron smiled as gave the Voltron Force a final wave before entering the ship.

It was only until they had left Arus’s orbit that Saoche broke the silence. They had the cabin completely to themselves. “You ain’t pissed?”

Xiron looked at her. “Of course not. We discussed this before.”

“But the Hydra is shit now...”

“You-know-who expected it, and I have my temporal skills. It is not a problem.”

“Voltron is a strange piece of machinery.”

“Yes, but the data we have gained from this scenario has been extremely helpful. Someday, its unique mysteries will be uncovered.”

“Think You-know-who will speak to me?”

“Of course. I explained to him that you ingratiated yourself to the Voltron Force to get on Voltron and see combat firsthand. He is very interested in the synergy involved. Besides, if he wants to actually use his secret finances, he will have to speak to you sometime.”

“So, everything is good then?”

“No major deviations to the master plan. All in all, successful enough to celebrate. And for You-know-who to say that, it is a victory indeed.”

“I’m beat. I’m gonna take a nap right here. Lemme know when we get to the Garrison.”

“Very well, Saoche.”

“G’night, Reyk.”

“Sleep tight.”