The Space Between Stars

by wordswithdragons

Summary

Stranded across the galaxy, Shiro and Keith must survive the cold blooded creatures that lurk upon the planet they crash landed on. Pidge, Hunk and Lance find themselves caught up on a Galra infested planet of winged aliens, while Allura and Coran face coming to terms with their greatest hope and sorrow: Altea. // A rewriting, fix-it fic of Voltron from season one onwards, featuring families, backstories, aliens, loss, and love. More info inside.

Notes

This is rewrite of season two which consists of basically taking the bulk of season two and tweaking most if not all of the elements and completely rewriting certain aspects of it. The last thing I want is for this fic to be a disappointment to those who, like me, were already disappointed with season 2 in many ways.

This fic is an attempt to write season two the way I would have done it, developing all the characters and their relationships in a way that is perhaps unrealistic to expect of a TV show, but I digress. Although I am developing all of the Voltron team (especially Lance and Hunk, since they got the least screen of the Paladins this season) there will be a heavier focus on Shiro and Allura than perhaps the rest given the sheer amount of unexplored potential between the two and the rest of the team in season two, however I hope to give everyone
about the same amount of page time. I am still learning how to write everyone else, so if you have any tips for how to write a certain character/relationship, please let me know, I'd love to hear them.

I'll preface this by saying right now the fic will be more Shallura than Klance centric due to the narrative arc I'm developing, my comfort level with characterization, and personal preference. That being said, all relationships between all of the characters will be explored and developed, and none shall be romantic aside from the two previously mentioned.

Above all else, I hope you enjoy this story as much as I have enjoyed writing it thus far, and I'd LOVE to hear your thoughts.

Now, without further ado: go to 1x11 of Voltron: Legendary Defender, "The Black Paladin", and come back once you get to the end.
Allura had never felt so helpless in her entire life. Discounting the 10,000 years in the cryo-pod, she had never been forced to watch all her hopes shatter and spin madly out of control right before her eyes. The fall of Altea had been destruction but with a rising, desperate hope swelling in her chest. She and her father had the Lions; they could still win this.

They could still win this.

She forced herself not to yell as the Paladins fell into the current of the wormhole, washing over them ocean waves, tangling up their tails and heads, metal panes rattling as their screams echoed over the commlink. Shiro's, loud and raw, mingled with the pain of the injury Haggar had given him, was worst of all, ringing in her ears long after it had stopped and the blaring of the castle alarms took its place. Red lights flashed as the control panel blocked her at every opportunity.

"They've vanished in the temporal rift!" she cried, her panic getting the better of her for a moment. "The Lions are gone!"

"Let's check the rift-exiting positioning monitor," said Coran, his fingers flying across his keyboard as fast as her heart was pounding, "to see where this wormhole is taking us."

"Coran look! There appears to be something on the other end. We're heading right toward it." Her shoulders hunched over slightly when the next realization set in, bracing her legs to keep herself steady.

"Scanners show there's no exit. It's just nothingness. Find an exit before we run smack into the void."

"I can't. I've lost control of the Castle." Angry red signs blared up at her against Altean blue, and her heart sank. There was no way out.

"Brace yourself—we're about to hit it!"

Or was there?

Allura's gaze dropped to the pillars holding up the steering mechanism, and she dropped to her knees, the impact sending a painful shudder up the rest of her body. She ignored it, fingers scrabbling for the panelling covering the steering. Her nails found a crack and she wrested the panel open, tossing the metal away and not caring to see where it landed. Buttons with Altean lettering stared back at her, dusty and almost covered in grime except for the faint blue pulse.

"Allura?" came Coran's confused voice.

She didn't look up as she pressed in a code, the one her father said would always work: her birthday. The keys glowed a pure white once she was done, and lettering flashed across the screen: System override. Manual steering activated.

She placed her palms back on the steering mechanism, and rolled the axis under her palm; the Castle made a sharp swerve, and for a moment, she dared let herself hope they'd join their Paladins.
somewhere, scattered across the universe.

Of course, she could never be that lucky. It was too late as the bow of the castle hit the spiralling current Haggar had conjured up, their side slamming into the void. She wielded her eyes shut as the very bones of the Castle shook, and prayed she wouldn't be like Hunk and throw up whatever was left in her stomach.

The Castle tilted and she nearly fell, as blinding darkness enveloped the Castle—her existence—and then, light.

Hunk landed first. His Lion dropped and rolled three times over, skidding to a halt and staying still for a moment, long enough for him to see he had come to the edge of a rocky cliff with a long drop below, once he got his bearings.

The Yellow Paladin to let out a well-deserved sigh of relief, before Lance and Pidge smashed into him, one after the other. The three Paladins screamed as their Lions dropped off the cliff into another chaotic fall.

"C'mon girl," Pidge hissed, yanking at her controls. The Green Lion didn't budge, tumbling ceaselessly through the sky, slamming into and then bouncing off a rocky ledge.

"Blue's not listening at all," said Lance.

They fell a good 10 feet, reminding Hunk all too much of the caverns in the Balmera, with the length of the fall, but this time it was all too easy to scream until his Lion crash-landed with a sickening crunch on cold, hard earth. His neck hit the back of his seat, and cringing from whip-lash, Hunk slowly unbuckled himself from his seat and made his out to his Lion's maw, stepping out onto the strange new planet they had landed on.

It didn't look all different from Earth, with flat, sand coloured rocks and cliffs and thin ledges. They hadn't landed in a cavern, and over the rolling, dry landscape, he could see a town glimmering in the distance made up of bright red buildings. The sun wasn't glaring, but the air was still humid and making the back of his neck turn sticky.

He turned away towards Blue as the Lion's mouth opened and Lance stumbled out. Hunk quickly caught him and his best friend gave him a grateful smile.

"Thanks buddy."

He straightened up once Pidge joined them, cautiously taking off her helmet. Her hair turned poofier than usual in the humid air.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Dunno," said Hunk. "But there seems to be a town… The Lions seem too banged up, so I guess we should walk?"

Lance shrugged. "Guess so. Maybe we can get some help in repairing our Lions?"

Hunk glanced back at his. "I probably could if I had the parts, but honestly, I think they just need some time to rest."

"Does that mean we get to rest too?" Lance asked hopefully.
Pidge rolled her eyes. "No."

The Blue Paladin let out a whine, but followed his friends as they started over the small hill, and down towards the town. They crossed over a thin, drying stream that was more caked mud than water and flat plains of rock with some boulders lying around that had perhaps come off of the cliff decades ago.

They walked in silence, as there wasn't much to say. Talking about the grumbling of their stomachs would only make the hunger pains even worse, although Hunk wasn't sure that was entirely possible. Talking about what could have happened to the others was painful in a whole other way, since they had no clue. Hunk knew they were lucky to have wound up together—the Garrison trio, together again, just like they had been at the start of this adventure. He imagined what he would have done, already reluctant to sneak up to the roof, to break Shiro out of Garrison's clutches, if he had known what it would lead to. That it would lead to this.

Would he had have turned and run? Hunk didn't know. But he knew he wasn't running now. Zarkon had enslaved hundreds of thousands of planets just like the Balmera, just like Shay and her people. He had destroyed planets in the same way he had destroyed Altea.

They had to stop him. And they would somehow, Hunk thought, trying to think on the positive side for once. Once they got the team back together.

If they got the team back together. Who knew where the others were? They could be thousands of galaxies away.

At least he had Lance with him. He and Lance had hardly been apart since they met when they were eight years old, and he didn't know he would do without his best friend.

The sun set far faster than their progress, and it was a relief when the air turned cooler, cloaking them in night.

Until they saw bright yellow eyes—dozens of them, all in pairs, more popping up with every blink—glowing in the gloomy darkness.

"Um guys," said Lance nervously. "We've got company."

In hindsight, sitting slumped against a rock while his wound pulsed painfully with every breath, Shiro supposed it was nothing short of a miracle he had managed to haul himself out of the Black Lion in the first place. Then again, the fact he had survived this long was miraculous anyway. Or maybe that was too graceful a word for the brutality he had been forced to show back in the arena, the monster he had had to become to keep himself alive.

Do you really think a monster like you could be a Voltron Paladin?

Zarkon's connection with the Black Lion had overpowered his. Sendak had been right, Shiro realized dully. Pain overshadowed everything else. But if he was a monster, then wasn't Zarkon worse? What was the truth? Where was the line he still hadn't crossed?

Static crackled across his commlink, and then Keith's panicked voice, "Shiro? Shiro can you hear me?"

His temple throbbed as Shiro pushed himself into more of a sitting position. "Keith?" More static. "Keith I'm here. Where are you?"
There was a horrifying moment of ear-grating static, and then Keith's voice broke through the noise, sounding out of breath but not pained. "I don't know, not far I think. Where are you? Are you okay?"

"Takes a lot more than a glowing purple wound and a fall from the upper atmosphere crashing into a surface at what I guess is about 20 meters per second to get rid of me. How are you?" He could practically picture the flat, dry-eyed stare on the other side of the commlink, and sighed. "It looks like I'm in some kind of canyon, I'm a few ledges above from where my Lion crashed."

Keith's voice brightened, "I think I can get a reading on your Lion. Sit tight, Shiro, I'm coming."

"I can't exactly go anywhere," Shiro muttered under his breath, yet there was a sense of relief in knowing that not only was Keith unharmed, the kid wasn't alone—Shiro wasn't alone—and that they could figure things out together. He pried his hand away from his side, grimacing when he saw the purple gashes glow, like demonic claw marks.

He didn't know what that witch Haggar had done to him, but he hoped it was nothing the cryopods couldn't fix. Nothing could be worse than the hunk of Galra metal that was currently his arm, could it?

Then he heard the low growling, and his heart sank when he saw creatures with low slung bodies and sloping backs, scrunched up snouts sniffing over the Black Lion.

The universe just loved proving him wrong, didn't it?

"Actually, Keith," he spoke into the commlink, trying not to sound too urgent. The last thing he wanted was to make Keith freak out and lose his focus. The boy already had a problem with being patient after all, after charging into a one-on-one battle with Zarkon that was all too clear. "You better hurry."

Choking back a cough, Shiro forced himself to his feet. He'd be useless to the team if he was dead, and he had survived much worse than this, hadn't he? Faint memories told him he had in the arena, the loss of his arm, but they were fuzzy as best. Keith's panicked breathing (oh, great) crackled through the static lines of their commlink.

Pidge dove behind Lance as the aliens came into light: owlish eyes peered back at her, framed by long, almost feathery lashes. The rest of the aliens were garbed in thick brown feathers around their necks and elbows, the rest hidden by swaths of white cloth. The rest of their skin appeared to be smooth and unblemished, a deep rich brown. Tall, wide black or brown wings arched out their backs.

One with greying feathers and choppy black hair stepped forward, and let out a shrill, loud hoot, almost like a scream. "You! You're Paladins of Voltron! You must have seen our distress beacon!"

"Distress beacon?" Hunk repeated uncertainly.

Pidge emerged from behind Lance, her brow furrowing. "Wait, you know who we are?"

He let out a derisive snort, throwing out his arms in a gesture towards the aliens. "Don't be stupid Pidge, of course they know who we are! I'm Lance, the Blue Paladin, and currently looking for a Mrs. Blue if—" Pidge elbowed him in the stomach. "Ow!"

Hunk took a step forward. "The Galra are here?"
"In our atmosphere, yes. They have not landed but it is only a matter of time, and our greatest warriors we're all captured, except for one. I am Adelina, the Chief of the Winged Ones. The Blue Paladin is Lance. Who are you, strong one?"

He placed a hand on his chest. "I'm Hunk, and this is Pidge. We were separated from the rest of the Paladins, our Lions are recuperating now—that's actually why we came here, to see if—" The word help got lodged in his throat when he saw the desperate hope shining in the Winged Ones eyes. "If we could start helping you with this problem, I mean, we knew you had some kind of problem, and—"

"Oh, thank you Paladins. Let us take you to our village, we can offer you hospitality, and whatever you need to beat the Galra!"

Hunk, Pidge and Lance exchanged wide, uneasy smiles once Adelina's back was turned, leading them and the rest of her squadron back towards their home. Up close, the town looked quite different, with tall buildings and hardly any stairs, glittering lights among the yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. Birds that resembled owls with rainbow coloured feathers were perched on every window sill and building top, with specially made bird houses for them.

The rest of the Winged Ones dispersed, sans Adelina, who never strayed from her path as she led them further into the town. Faces peered down from tall buildings, a slight warm breeze picking up in the air around them and from the beat of their wings. Something that smelled like veggie stew wafted from the open windows of almost every building, and Pidge's stomach gurgled; she hadn't realized quite how hungry she was until that very moment.

"Our greatest warrior will see you now," said Adelina, stopping in front of an open roof hut with a canopy strewn over as a makeshift ceiling. There was a blue curtain draped over the doorway. "Once you're finished speaking, we'll arrange for some nourishment."

"Are ya sure that nourishment will be edible?" Lance whispered to Hunk.

Before he could respond, Pidge said, "Let's go meet this warrior person. Maybe they can help us." And she moved past the two boys and pushed away the curtain, Lance and Hunk flanking her as they entered the hut.

It was dimly lit with candles framing the circular shape, along the edges of the wall. Sitting in the centre of a room was a woman with short, choppy black hair that curled around her chin, and wide, arching black wings—the biggest ones Pidge had seen so far—the tips brushing the ceiling.

"We were sent by your Chief," said Lance. "Um, you are the greatest warrior right?"

The wings stirred as the woman got to her feet, golden eyes against rich warm skin when she turned around to face them. Her eyes were so intense—burning and defiant and angry—it almost made Pidge take a step back into Hunk's stomach.

"My name is Elyta." Her voice was as sharp as the knife clipped to her side, the blade running along to her knee. Another sword in its scabbard was resting on her other hip. "The Galra took my family. We are going to get them back."

The Castle of Lions shuddered and stopped, upturning some sort of heavy substance. Allura tightly gripped the pillars of the steering mechanism to keep from being thrown into the wall, the metal bending under her tight grip. Coran had fallen out of his chair but seemed unharmed as red lights flashed, and then the power went dead, enveloping them in blurry darkness.
She coughed into her arm, tentatively raising her head and squinting in the dark. The markings next to her eyes glowed. "C-Coran?"

"I'm alright princess," he wheezed, somewhere underneath a circuit board. "Are you—"

"We've stopped, somewhere," said Allura, looking at the windows. One had a large fracture running down the middle, and half of the windows were smeared with mud. Slivers of bright lilac peeked through the grime. "Somewhere with a lilac sky—?" It looked familiar, that shade of purple. A lump formed in her throat. Painfully familiar.

"Seems like it." Coran pulled himself to his feet. "Hopefully there's civilization nearby, we'll have to fix parts of the Castle." He staggered over to her and helped her to her feet, and they stumbled to the door together, leaning on each other.

Allura stepped away from him when the door didn't automatically open for them, and ripped the door apart with her bare hands, folding each metal piece in half and tossing them in front of her. They banged off the walls as she and Coran stepped into the hallways, before going still, and she gave each door the same treatment until they were at the exit of the Castle. The elevator wouldn't lower, but the Castle had landed on its side, so she was confident they could both make the jump with perhaps a bit of shapeshifting and extra height.

Her knees nearly buckled when her feet hit the dirt, feeling a little dizzy. Spending three days in a Galra prison with no food or water and then engaging in a space battle probably wasn't the best idea, but she didn't have much of a choice these days. Closing her eyes and waiting for her head to stop spinning, Allura let herself shrink back to her original height.

Coran landed neatly beside her and did the same thing. "Well, let's see where we are, shall we? We'll need some help getting the Castle aligned properly with the engines."

The Castle was endurable, but with half of it caked in mud and one engine fizzing in a watery puddle of mud, it wasn't going anywhere until they got it straightened out and standing tall for takeoff.

As for where they were...

The mud gave way to a water-logged grassy meadow, which stretched for miles and miles with the lilac sky and sun casting a warm glow. Rocks the size of hail were in clusters along the riverbed and everywhere else, slowly sinking into the mud. Beyond the meadow were tall buildings made of cream coloured marble, too far away to really make out. Just below, at the tip of Allura's vision, the very edges of the meadow miles away, were dots of pink, hundreds of them, bleeding into each other.

"Are those..." She staggered closer, gulping down a breath of fresh air."Are those juniberries?" If she was right—stars above, how could she be right? How was this possible? The mud under her shoes was real, the crash was real, but this...this couldn't be real. Everything ached.

Coran turned in a circle, staring wide eyed at everything before tears started spilling down his cheeks. "Allura. I think we're on Altea."
Across the Universe (II)

Chapter Summary

After finding themselves on Altea a day before it falls, Allura and Coran attempt to navigate how much they should change history, and how to get back to the present… if they even want to. Shiro and Keith reflect on their family, and their chances of survival, while the Garrison trio face new challenges in helping a winged race overtaken by the Galra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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By the time the creatures got tired of sniffing around the Black Lion, Shiro had limped to a cave and taken refuge there. It was a slim opening and he wiggled his way in best he could, hearing the creatures growl to each other once they spotted him—or detected his scent; he wasn't sure what their weaknesses or capabilities were, which made it all the more terrifying to be stuck in a small, tight space with their claws pawing his only exit, scrabbling and chipping away slowly at the rock.

"Keith, uh, you should probably hurry," Shiro said through the commlink. He wasn't sure how much of the static was blocking their connection.

"I'll be right there—"

A heavy pit grew in Shiro's stomach as he realized 'right there' may not be soon enough. Groaning, he pushed himself onto pathetically shaky legs and his hands searched the rock walls for some kind of ledge or foothold, just to get his balance, when his panicked mind—the snarling creatures were beginning to destroy the meagre boulders blocking their path—remembered his jetpack.

Wisps of fire and smoke came out of the device, but it still sent him shooting upwards. The front of his foot caught the ledge as he angled himself up and out of the narrow crevice, and he tripped and stumbled hard onto the rocky ground above it. One of the creatures growled to the others and he knew it wouldn't be long before they caught up to him.

"Endure and survive," he reminded himself, trying to close off his emotions. It had always worked in the gladiator ring. Most of the time, anyway. His arm sputtered as he tried to activate it, before glowing a flickering purple. The damn thing was malfunctioning, but at least it was somewhat working. He pulled himself into a shaky defensive stance, raising his arm as the only weapon he had. He had a feeling paladin armour wouldn't work too well against the creature's claws and tusks.

He could see the banged up form of his Lion, resting her head on her paws as Keith's voice crackled through the commlink. "I'm on my way, Shiro, just hold on a little longer—"

He didn't know if that would be possible as the creatures clawed their way up to the ledge he was on, circling him and snapping their jaws.

He looked hopelessly to the Black Lion. There was no reason for her to respond—she was damaged,
had spat him out into space and gone rogue on him once seeing her old paladin, her true paladin. Zarkon.

His stomach squirmed at the thought of it, rather than imminent death.

He had stared death in the eyes many times before, after all. Had narrowly avoided it more times than he could count. He had always thought it would be faster, or agonizingly slow. Getting struck down in the arena in a flash, or watching his opponent loom over him before making the final blow. The seconds ticking by, and him, helpless.

He wouldn't let himself be helpless anymore—if only for the team. For the Paladins and Allura and Coran, who were all counting on him. They were only in this mess after all, because he had lost Allura. And if Keith came with these creatures still prowling around and he got hurt... Shiro wouldn't let anyone else get hurt fixing his mistakes. Not again.

He raised his head, chancing a look over at the Black Lion, hoping to see her eyes glow. A flicker of light. Anything. But there was nothing. Had Zarkon's renewed connection broken her the same way the Galra had broken him? Through his frustration, the shakiness of his hands, he felt pity stir in his chest. It was cold, unlike the pulsing heat of the wound at his side.

The largest creature, even if it had the most obvious ribcage (did they have ribcages? Or was alien biology fundamentally different?), managed to haul itself up onto the ledge. He was running out of time.

Gritting his teeth and momentarily mourning the loss of his helmet— he didn't want to imagine these things eating his brain—Shiro forced himself into a crouch, trying to activate his arm again. The purple light fizzled but maintained some type of glow, and he only hoped it was enough to be a somewhat lethal weapon.

It would have to be enough.

He waited two heartbeats before hurtling himself forwards, dodging a swipe of the creature's claw and then brought his hand up like a dagger. The creature swerved around it, and this time its claw caught him on the side, aggravating the pulsing purple wound as it tossed him with one mighty sweep. Shiro hit the floor hard, and rolled, groaning.

There was nothing but loud static clogging up his commlink, even if he could hear faint, disjointed snippets of what Keith was saying, reassurances that he'd be here soon. But if it was growing worse, than Keith could have even been headed in the wrong direction.

He wouldn't get here in time. No one was coming to save him.

Shiro took a deep breath, and pushed himself onto his knees. He'd always been determined, even in the gladiator ring, that he'd die fighting if he could help it.

The two other creatures joined the first one, circling him like vultures with low growls building in their throats. The biggest one, the first, pounced before he could steady himself. The creature's claws dug into the already weathered plates of his armour, scratching furiously and slowly chipping away tiny flecks of white.

He was going to die here, and he was never going to see his team, or his family again.

Maybe things would have turned out different if he had been better. If he had never let Allura get captured in the first place; if he'd been able to remain in control over the Black Lion, to help the team instead of needing to be rescued, again. Maybe then they would have had enough time to get out
once the shield had gone down, before Zarkon's witch had ruined everything.

Before he had ruined everything.

And what kind of paladin was he if he couldn't even keep his Lion from falling into enemy hands? He couldn't find the strength to raise his head one last time to look at Black, not with this bony creature snapping its jaw closer and closer to his throat.

*I'm sorry Black.*

A roar shattered the air and his eardrums, and then suddenly the creatures were off of him, and he could breathe properly again. Black and a glowing yellow filled his vision, but unlike Haggar's harsh, cruel light, this was softer. More powerful.

Black's belly loomed well above his head, her paws outstretched well on either side of him but close enough to be protective. She was protecting him. She had saved him.

"Shiro—can you hear me? Shiro!"

"Loud and clear, Keith," he said over the commlink. His fellow paladin's voice was still obscured by static, but coming in far more quickly. Keith must have been close. "I'm alright, Black—" The wound in his side pulsed painfully, and his voice broke off.

"I'll be there soon," Keith promised, and this time he kept it, as Shiro saw him coming up over the ridge, over the ledge, until he was only a few feet away. Black slowly backed down, easing back onto her haunches like the giant metallic cat she was, her tail swirled behind her.

Shiro hefted himself into a sitting position, leaning against the curve of Black's side as she settled onto the ground, with a little help from Keith. "We should make camp," he managed, hoping his hand could light up so they could get a fire going.

Keith placed a hand on his arm and lowered it. "You're still hurt, Shiro. I'll go get Red, and we'll see if she's operational. She can help us get a fire going. I'll be right back, okay? Don't go anywhere."

"Where would I go?" he called after him, as Keith pulled on his helmet. It wasn't like his legs were cooperating at the moment, and the wound in his side hurt more than ever. When would that witch stop tormenting him? When would her ruinous, iron grip finally loosen on his life and his body?

He closed his eyes for what only felt like moments when he heard the sound of metal crunching against the ground, and saw Keith leading a limping Red back over the ridge. The Lion managed to spurt out some sparks of fire once he had gathered some rocks that seemed flammable, and created a makeshift camp site.

"Looks like your survival training in the Garrison paid off," said Shiro proudly.

Keith ducked his head as he took a seat. "Or living in the desert for a year did," he said sourly.

Shiro frowned. "I know the Garrison was not a perfect school, nor were you a perfect student, but—"

"They tried to convince me you were dead," Keith snapped. "And I almost believed them too, I just—I didn't have anyone else left."

"Why didn't you go back to my mother? I'm sure she was worried."
"Why would she have been notified that I was expelled? You were listed as my next of kin, and she was listed as yours. The Garrison wouldn't tell me anything about the mission…” Keith frowned. "You were buried in the same graveyard, by the way. They buried your diploma, next to Dad and Uncle Hiro. Aunt Gina has your medals."

Shiro leaned back and closed his eyes. Hiro and Gina. His dead father, his living mother. "They really do think I'm dead, don't they?"

"Yeah. I'm afraid they do.” Keith scowled. "The Garrison said the mission failure was your fault, but none of us believed that."

"I know."

"That's why I didn't tell your mom. I had to stay and figure out what I could find, I—"

"I understand, Keith,” said Shiro, with a slight smile. "I would have done the same for you. I'm just saying, getting yourself kicked out of the Garrison for behavioural problems and then living in the nearby desert probably wasn't the most thought out route. You don't always think things through."

"Well neither did you, when you decided to attack Zarkon head on."

"I just invaded his base. You were the one who literally attacked him head on. Which is why your Lion is so banged up right now."

"Okay, okay—" Keith held up his hands, frowning again. "Just admit that you're not always the most rational when it comes to Princess Allura."

Shiro's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Keith sighed. "Nothing."

Shiro was silent for a moment, his mind now stuck on the princess. She hadn't left it since being taken captive by the Galra. Since the moment she'd left him, or perhaps it was the other way around: when he'd been forced to leave her. That one last smile she'd given him had haunted him, but so had the look of fear and desperation only moments before. His heart clenched.

"Do you think Allura and the others are okay?" he said finally, when he couldn't fight it anymore.

Keith snorted. "Amazing. You almost died three times today and have a gaping hole in your side and you're worried about Allura?"

Shiro fought the flush rising to his cheeks. "Yes," he said shortly. "And everyone else."

Keith dropped his gaze to the crackling fire, his eyes distant. "Yeah," the Red Paladin said gloomily, although Shiro could tell by the look in his eyes it wasn't the princess he was thinking of. "Me too." He was quiet before he asked, "How long do you think we'll be stuck here?"

"I don't know," Shiro admitted. "But once the lions are operational, we should leave this planet and figure out where we are. Find a less hostile place, find food and water."

"Maybe the others can come rescue us," Keith suggested.

Shiro thought of the creatures, and wondered where they had crawled off too. If they would dare come back, but it was probably better not to find out. "Yeah."

And soon.
It had only taken a few mile's hike for Elyta to show them the high, red mountains where the Galra ship was anchored. Pods were set into the mountains ledges, with a battleship looming above and casting shadows over the white peaks. Her black wings fanned out on either side of her, as they crept closer to the mountain. Two moons were setting over the horizon, as night slowly left the planet of Hootowling.

"I understand that your lions are not operational at the moment," she said, as Lance, Pidge, and Hunk holed themselves away behind a cluster of boulders. "But we don't have the time to waste. Your lions cannot be that powerful, anyway, without wings and swords."

"So, you want us to help you break into a galra ship, why?" said Lance flatly.

Elyta turned her sharp eyes on him, and smiled. "Strength in numbers, blue one. See over there?" She pointed to floating rectangles that were hovering up from the ground, and then docking at the belly of a huge Galra warship. "They are stealing our minerals to create more powerful guns, but the minerals are only powerful when they are mixed with a feather of our wings. That is why they have taken my family and many others prisoner. We must free them."

"Why didn't you get taken?"

Her expression darkened. "I was too strong, and they preyed on the weak, the way they always do."

"We can use our bayards to open up a hole to get into the ship," said Lance.

"Why not just go up hidden in one of the cargo transports?" asked Hunk.

"It might be hard for Elyta to hide her beautiful wings."

The winged woman rolled her eyes. "The ship is large, and they may have different prisoners in different parts of the ship. I do not believe we are the only aliens imprisoned there. I think it is in our best interest. Skinny blue and big yellow, you can sneak up with the cargo. The small green one and I will sneak aboard another way using my, " she shot a pointed look at Lance, "powerful wings."

Lance gulped. "Yes ma'am."

"Good." Elyta looked to Pidge, and then nodded. "Let's go."

Pidge reluctantly left Lance and Hunk to their own devices, but knew that they would be fine. They were capable, Hunk mentally and physically strong, and Lance, as much as she would never admit it, could come up with some pretty good plans sometimes, and Hunk knew how to follow his lead (in spite of however much he often didn't want to). But beyond that, they made a good team, as two people who were that incredibly close and in sync with each other, and she knew it was no coincidence that, even forgetting how she'd had to keep her identity a secret, she had never fit with them the same way they fit with each other.

But that was just fine, too. She'd never had many friends. Other kids her age had thought she was weird, or too much of a brainiac. Her best friend growing up had been her brother, and now Matt...

She swallowed hard as she glanced at Elyta. Wanting to rescue your family from the Galra? That was something she could understand all too well.

"So," Pidge cocked one hand on her hip, "what's the—"
Elyta gripped her under each arm, and soared into the air with a great flap of her wings, and Pidge did her best not to scream too loudly.

Flying without a lion was terrifying, and she managed to clamp her mouth shut despite the terror having a tight hold over her heart, as they flew closer towards the ship, around the back end of the curve of one of the mountains, so none of the galra sentries would spot them. Elyta kept her upright as they approached the ship, until Pidge could touch the metal side with her gloved hand, and summoned her bayard to her hand. The green whip glowed as she jammed it into the wall, cutting its way through the metal.

She pushed the metal circle she had cut out through with her feet, and then swung herself inside. She shifted herself into a crouch, bayard in hand, as Elyta squeezed herself and her large leathery wings through the hole. Pidge tilted her head as she mentally activated her commlink, picking up on the boys' signals.

"Lance? Hunk? You there?" she whispered.

"Loud and clear, Pidge," said Lance with a cocky flare, and she could picture the shit-eating grin on his face and rolled her eyes.

"You guys got in okay?" checked Hunk.

"Mmhm. I think we're on the third floor. You?"

"Hunk hacked into a sentry like a boss," Lance said excitedly, "Only after Lance shot it down like a boss," added Hunk, and there was the sound of them exchanging a quick high-five.

"We're downloading blueprints of the place now," Lance continued. "We'll send them to you over the feed once we got 'em, okay? They're almost done... alright, we're tracking your signal now... You're on the fourth floor, above a storage unit and to your left, one floor up, is the first floor of a prison cell. There's some cells below Hunk and I right now, so—"

"Uh, Lance?" said Hunk, his voice rising in nervousness. "We got company!"

There was the sound of gunfire and blasters, but she knew they'd be alright. Both were pretty good sharpshooters, mostly under Shiro and Allura's guidance during training drills. Hopefully the other paladins and the rest of her team were okay too. She didn't want to forsake one family for the sake of saving another.

"We'll meet you in the bottom hangar when we need to escape," said Pidge, leaving the commlink open in case they had anymore updates, but ignoring the loud connection for the time being, as with a quick flurry of her fingers over the panel of her right arm, she brought up a hologram of the downloaded blueprint plans. If they were going to get prisoners back home, they'd need an actual shuttle of some kind, or a galra ship. They'd worry about not getting shot down by the locals when they came to it.

Elyta moved her weight forwards on a crouch, her wings fluttering behind her as she took out the sword strapped to her back, in between her wings. "Come," she beckoned, "let us go find my people."

They managed to mostly avoid the sentries, Pidge using the blueprints to guess their guard shift and changes as best she could as they crept towards the elevator that would take them to the next floor up. When they did get found, Elyta was more than capable at slicing them to pieces with quick
slashes of her sword, before any alarms could be found. Clearly, the galra didn't expect the Winged Ones to fight back with most of their warriors stolen away, their people diminished and devastated.

In a way, Elyta reminded Pidge of Allura. Maybe she and the princess would get along better than she thought, next time she saw her—if she saw her again—and they could talk about something other than peanuts and leaving Voltron.

Elyta cut down the sentries guarding the elevator with a quick punch and wide arc of her sword, and Pidge picked up a dismembered sentry's arm and placed it over the scanner. The doors dinged open and they rushed inside, Elyta shooting the scanner with a quick blast so they couldn't be easily followed.

An alarm suddenly blared, most likely activated by the destruction of the scanner, and galra soldiers charged down the connected hallway. A laser hit the high left corner of the elevator, burning it to a crisp, but the doors shut before they could properly reach the elevator, and Pidge loosed a breath of relief.

"You are brave," said Elyta admirably, "for a small one."

Pidge blinked. "Thank you?"

"The others are more competent than I thought as well."

She frowned a little. "If you thought so lowly of us, then why invite us on this mission?"

"I have heard the stories of Voltron, of your leader, the Champion. I thought at the very least, if you didn't die right away, you would be a good distraction for the galra."

Pidge almost snorted. "How...pragmatic of you."

Elyta smiled widely, looking delighted. "Thank you!"

It seemed to take forever for the elevator to rise, so long Pidge worried the galra had hijacked the controls, but maybe it was just because her heart was racing so fast even as her legs stood still, when the floors finally opened on the fifth floor. They were immediately bombarded by guards, and she found herself wishing for a bayard that could take down more enemies more efficiently, like Hunk and Lance's blasters, but she made due with her whip, sliding underneath and around people's legs and yanking them down by wrapping the whip around their ankles, and yanking them into one another. Elyta was similarly efficient, taking down more sentries with sweeps of her sword and barely breaking a sweat.

They used another sentry's hand to get through the final passcode, and found a hallway full of barred cells, filled to the brim with Winged Ones, their wings cramped and feathered hands clutching at the bars.

"Can you get them out?" Elyta asked, as her people all pushed forward as close to the bars as they could get, peering faces with owlish eyes.

"I need keys, or a code—" said Pidge, looking around. "A key card of some kind." Maybe it had been left behind with the guards outside?

"We can't go back out," Elyta barked, "I can hear the guards outside, we're boxed in."

"Just give me a few minutes to hack the system." Pidge went to the nearest key pad, and plugged in.
Elyta threw her a glare. "Make it a minute, Green Paladin. We don't have time to waste."

Pidge cursed furiously under her breath as she met the first firewall of the system, working to undo it, while Elyta wandered down the hallway, greeting friends and looking for her family. She could hear Galra banging on the door keeping them out and knew it was only a matter of time before they broke through.

They were running out of time. She only prayed her fingers could move fast enough, and that the boys were having better luck than she was.

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The castle was unmistakable, Allura realized, staring at it. It looked exactly the way it had in her youth, even more so than it did in the present, smelling of dust and decay and most rooms still untouched or not fully functional. Looming over the field of juniberries was the castle ship in all its glory, and above it were the spiralling sky cities, flat planes of white metal moulded into laboratories and schools so that the ground below could be used for nature and farming and beauty.

Her heart leapt to her throat.

Altea. She was finally home.

"I don't understand," she mumbled, her eyes filling with tears. "This—this should not be possible. How did this—"

"Haggar must have turned the wormhole into a time warp—intentionally or not, her magic messed it up," said Coran, worriedly stroking his mustache. "I… we really are on Altea, princess. We just have to figure out what time period we're in. The castle's looked the same since my father was a boy. And we'll have to go about this carefully of course, we don't want to mess with time—very dangerous thing, you know—"

She nodded numbly, barely hearing him, but her mind did get snagged on a sharp, prying thought. "And then we go back to the present? Without changing anything?"

Coran approached her tentatively. "We don't know how our presence here—additional presence—may affect the future. If we change something, it may end up changing things for the worse rather than the better. History can be a funny thing, even with good intentions."

Something sharp snapped into place inside her, as she narrowed her eyes. "We can't just stand here and do nothing—"

"Good thing we're not, then." Coran clasped his hands behind his back. "Let's go to the palace, princess. We need to start putting the pieces together."

Allura grumbled under her breath, and followed him away from their castleship to well, the actual castleship in its prime. If they were in the Altea she remembered, the years she had lived there, then perhaps... Her eyes watched Coran's back, and then flickered to the field of juniberries, trying to breathe in the scent before they would have to be memories again. But maybe...

If Coran expected her to not save her people—their people—when they had been given a second chance, than he had another thing coming.

The pathway led to the castle was surprisingly scarce of Alteans, but those that were there were garbed in white armour adorned with the colours of their family houses, with hints of pink for fallen loved ones. Soldiers. She wondered, if this was far back enough before the fall of Altea, if her
mother would still be alive. If that was the case, she wouldn't be able to speak with her, as she had been only a child, 100 years old, when her mother had passed on. But she could steal a look, have something more to remember her by than a golden circlet and an empty castle.

The foyer of the palace was swirling with activity, generals and battle strategists and more soldiers. She recognized Thora Wimbleton Smythe standing in a cadet's uniform, who had her brother's same gingery hair and chipper look to her eyes, blue markings curved underneath. Coran nearly stopped short at the sight of his younger sister.

"Thora."

Allura tugged on his arm, pulling him forward before they could be spotted. But she knew one thing for sure, now. They were not far from the fall of Altea. Only a year out, perhaps, before the hundredth day of their third month, in the two-hundred-twenty-thousandth year of the Ancients. The darkest day of Altean history, and a day she had spent most of which locked away with in a cryopod, she thought with some bitterness.

But if Coran was right, they couldn't be spotted, or interact with anyone, until it was absolutely necessary.

They ducked down an adjourning hallway, as Coran sniffled violently, and she patted him gently on the back. "I never got to say goodbye to her," he revealed quietly, and something in her heart broke.

Thora had been the closest thing she'd had to an aunt, a talented Altean woman in her late 400s with a great sense of humour, not unlike her brother. She and Coran had been thick of thieves as children, and she'd been working her way up to a position in the castle before the fall.

"I'm sorry, Coran," she told him. She couldn't find the strength to speak it, but she knew, somewhat, how he had been feeling. Granted, the last time he'd seen Thora had been a happy occasion, at her wedding, rather than a burning battlefield when Allura hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye to her father, but still. She knew how freshly the wound could ache.

Coran shook himself straight by the jacket. "No, no, you're right, princess. We have to focus on the present—er, the past? The future? My grandfather was very interested in the physics of time, but we never thought it would be possible—"

"Focus, Coran."

"Yes, right."

They were walking towards her old room, as if Allura was right, she was always out during this time of day, usually training with the knights of her father's guard in combat of all kinds. Her room would be a safe place to orient herself, and check the Altean tomes for a way home—well, not home, but back to the present, to her paladins. Her lungs turned tight as they rounded a corner, and saw the door to her room up ahead, connected with the hallway of the royal family: her father's room that had once been her parents, a room for Coran as her father's trusted advisor, and her mother's memorial room.

"Daughter?"

Her heart lodged itself in her throat as she found herself face to face with her father. He was swathed in his usual blue cape and white and yellow armour, looking as old as he did in his AI.

"Hello, father," she greeted. Coran was shock still, and Alfor looked at him.
"Are you alright, old friend? You look rather pale."

"F-fine!" Coran forced a laugh that came out more nervous than sincere. "You know me, chipper as always, I was merely speaking with the princess about the—the horrible state of things—"

Alfor's concern melted in something more grim, and serious. "Of course, Coran. I do have a matter I wish to speak with you later about. But for now, leave me with my daughter?"

"Certainly, sire," said Coran, far more solemnly. He looked on the verge of tears, and avoided Allura's eyes when she glanced at him. "I will simply be... elsewhere."

But for now, she turned her attention to her father. It looked like she would get one last conversation, after all. "Yes Father?"

"Allura." Alfor took her hands, and squeezed them. "My little juniberry, I... am so proud of the woman you have become. Your mother would be as well, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes?" she said slowly. Her father hadn't told her this in the first timeline (although she'd known it as well), so why was he telling her this now? Because she was here, and the opportunity amidst all the chaos had shown itself?

"Whatever comes, we are proud of you." He leaned forward and kissed the centre of her circlet. "Always remember that."

"I will." She felt like crying, but held back tears as he released her hands and stepped away. "I love you, Father."

He smiled at her, and she wanted to remember everything about it: the way his eyes crinkled, the wrinkles lining his face, the slight scruff of his beard. He hadn't smiled at her, at the end of all things. "I love you too, daughter."

It was the third time she had let him go, but it wasn't any easier.

Once she had collected herself, she found Coran in the library. He had often loitered there, fascinated by all the galaxies he hadn't visited and even the ones he had, and it was the place most likely to have the information it needed. It looked just like her castle, but with shining light of one of Altea's suns rather than the artificial light of a programmed day cycle. The rows upon rows of books reached up towards the ceiling in handsome wooden bookshelves, with arm chairs down below, and none of it was covered in dust.

He was bent over some books and she saw his grandfather's name printed as the author along the spine, and stroking his mustache as he read, looking up when he saw her, his expression uneasy. Clearly he didn't know if she was his Allura, or the one who belonged to the past. "Hello princess," he greeted.

"Relax, Coran, it's me. What have you found in regards of going back to the present?"

He gave her a grim look. "You're not going to be happy about it, princess."

She pursed her lips. "I have not been happy in a very long time." She clasped her hands in front of her. "Please, explain."

Coran glanced down at the book, and she saw a picture of a star exploding. "Well, in theory, it goes
like this...

"And, there!" Pidge allowed herself a quick, triumphant smile as the bars of every cell sank into the floor, and the citizens of Hootowling rushed out of their cells. She could see Elyta embracing two older Winged Ones, with the same golden eyes and black wings that she did, and what looked like a younger brother and sister.

Her gaze snapped away from the happy reunion to the door, as the galra pounded dents into it. They had gotten past the blasted up elevator, but now she needed to find a way out. She tuned into her commlink.

"Hunk? Lance?"

"We're here, Pidge," Hunk responded, breathing hard. "We're heading to the hangar now with a bunch of the Winged Ones. What about you?"

"We're a little preoccupied, but we'll be there soon," she promised. "Elyta, we need a game plan out of here."

She nodded. "Everyone, fly as close as you can to the ceiling. When the Galra come in, we'll drop on them. As soon as you can make your way to the door, flee. The Green Paladin of Voltron will lead you to safety."

Pidge readied her bayard as the Winged Ones all took to the ceiling, as high as they could, hovering in place. Elyta gave her father her sword, and tightly gripped her dagger instead. Pidge tried to steady her breathing, listening to her heartbeat pound in time as the galra broke down the door in heavy blows, until it burst open. They rushed in like a sea wave of guns and metal, purple and red as they fired and shed blood. The Winged Ones dropped down from the ceiling with war cries, all those who could fight taking the place of those who could not, one more elderly alien herding the younger ones towards the door.

Pidge twisted galra up in her whip, dodging blasts and almost getting pinned by one, with their thick, clawed hand, until Elyta knocked them off of her with a powerful kick, swooping down from above. She fought like a demon instead of the angel she so resembled, baring her teeth, her dagger covered up to the hilt in blood.

"Get my brother and sister out of here," she ordered, and Pidge clambered to her feet, locating the two siblings near the elder already herding the children out.

They had the same black hair and golden eyes as their older sister. "You're Elyta's siblings?" she checked, and they nodded, unsure; their parents and sister were still in the battle. She looked at the other fearful eyes of the children; one had had nearly all of their left wing plucked, and her stomach lurched at the blood tipped feathers that remained. "Follow me. I'm going to cut you a path through the galra outside, and get you to safety." She connected to her commlink. "Lance, Hunk, I'm going to need your help up here—get the Winged Ones you have to an some escape pods and get up here!"

"On our way," Lance promised.

She only hoped they could get here fast enough.

She hurtled herself forward into the crowd of oncoming galra, and any Winged One that could followed her lead. She knocked soldier after soldier down, and they grabbed the discarded guns and started mowing down the soldiers that came to take their fallen brethren's place. Her heart leapt to her
throat when she heard yelling and more blaster fire, until she saw Hunk and Lance emerging from the galra ranks, who were now being attacked on both sides.

A bunch of the children raced towards Hunk and grabbed onto his arms, and he hoisted a good five up on each arm, swinging as he adjusted to the sudden weight, his bayard disappearing from his hand. "Uh—"

"Get them to the pods," Lance said, still firing. "I'll cover ya!"

Hunk shot him a grateful grin, and hurried away with a bunch more of the children in tow. "C'mon kids, there are more ways to fly than just wings."

Lance and Pidge were not fighting side by side, as more and more of the Winged Ones left the prison cell, carrying Galra guns. Now there were only a dozen or so soldiers left in the prison cells fighting Elyta and her parents, the former having one foot on the threshold of the door.

Pidge's heart dropped when the wall on the far side of the prison suddenly opened to reveal a door, and more Galra rushed in, nearly as many as they had already defeated. It was too many for the few fighters the Paladins had left, as almost every other Winged One was already headed towards the bottom hangar.

Elyta went to step towards them, when her mother looked back at her, both their eyes wide and fearful, but firm.

And Pidge watched, astounded, as Elyta stepped back over the threshold, and shot the scanner. The doors on both side of the hall clanged shut, sealing her parents inside with the soldiers.

"What are you doing?" Pidge shouted, grabbing her arm.

Elyta's eyes are bright as she shook her off. "Let's go. Everyone, to the hangar. We're getting out of here."

She led everyone else down to the hangar, where Hunk was prepping another shuttle; one had already left, the alarms flashing and blaring only growing in volume. As soon as they came running in, he blasted the scanner to keep the doors sealed. "We got everyone?" he checked.

"Yes," said Elyta, her voice sharp. "Load up the rest of my people into a pod. Blue and Green Paladin, help me ready another shuttle for our escape."

They jumped into action, even as Pidge grumbled her breath, and Lance helped her wrench open a panel of the shuttle next to the one Hunk was preparing, so that she could hack into the controls as well. She hooked her arm up into the plug, and started tying. It was run of the mill, as Hunk and Elyta finished loading up his shuttle with all of the remaining Winged Ones, until something caught her eye.

{GUNS: blocked access—safety protocol}

Her fingers flew over the holographic keyboard above her arm. Better to be safe than sorry, right?

{GUNS: operational—achieved access—safety protocol: unlocked}

"Alright, everything should be operational," she called over. There was a rush of heat and wind as the first shuttle lifted into the air, and shot out the exit way, out of a similar loading dock to the one that had cargo. "I gave us access to guns in case we need to fight the Galra off with a distraction, or something."
"Nice work Pidge," said Lance, opening up the shuttle. "Now come on, let's blow this popsicle stand!"

The three paladins and Elyta climbed into the shuttle, and she found since it was more than an escape pod, it really didn't look that different from the flight simulator models back at the Garrison. Lance got into the pilot seat after almost tripping over his own long legs. "Sweet, I'm the pilot, Hunk, you're the engineer in case this rust bucket goes wayside, and Pidge, you'll be our communications specialist. Let the Winged Ones know not to shoot us down?" He grinned. "It's just like back home."

"You mean back home where you crashed our simulator?"

"Oh shut up."

Pidge hooked up herself up to the communications module and started sending out peace signals. With any luck, the Hootowlings would have tech to pick it up and show that they had received it.

The shuttle hurtled out of the hangar, and nearly crashed into a swarm of galra cargo before Lance swerved them out of the way. "Blue's controls are a bit different!" he laughed nervously.

"Well figure it out, 'cause we got company," said Pidge, looking out the windshield. A dozen if not more galra fighters were coming down after them.

"Elyta, man the guys!" said Lance.

Elyta blinked. "Um—"

"Those joystick thing-ys," Hunk added, pointing to things that resembled an upside down bicycle handle bar, with buttons on top.

Elyta gripped them and pressed the button experimentally, grinning when she hit a ship with a fiery blast. "Ooh! Yes, die galra scum!" she shouted with that same wild grin, firing off shot after shot.

Hunk and Lance exchanged a glance. "At least she's enthusiastic," said Hunk, until his expression changed to terror. "Lance, look out!"

"Whoa—!" Lance jerked the controls back to try and slow down the shuttle, before glancing up as Elyta shot down another one of the fighters. "Hunk, Pidge, if we hit certain points in the ship, can we bring it down?"

"You mean like pressure points?" asked Hunk, and he nodded. "Uh, yeah."

"Can you guys show Elyta where they are?"

He and Pidge glanced at each other. "Give us a minute," Hunk requested, hooking his arm up with the system, and opening up a hatch below his chair and fiddling with some wires.

"Make sure you reroute the image projection," Pidge reminded him, and he switched the red and black wires.

"Got it. Try activating it now?"

Pidge hit a button near her screens, and holographic images showed up on the windshield of their shuttle, blue and seemingly floating over certain pressure points in the ship: a curving piece of metal there as adornment, a weaker engine, among other places. Elyta hit each other with only a few misses, and Lance let out a whoop as the ship groaned and started to collapse in on itself.
"Yeah! Go team Voltron!"

"Lance, you need to fly us out of here before the ship crushes us," said Pidge.

"Uh, right..." Lance gulped nervously, but then set his shoulders and clutched the controls tightly.

"I know you can do this, buddy," said Hunk, and Lance loosed a deep breath. His jaw was tight, his eyes steady and focused.

As the great ship above them began to fall, he put the shuttle into overdrive, and the remaining fighters careened as they desperately tried to get away, swooping into their path. He did a series of spins, not unlike how the blue lion could maneuver, as the bottom of the ship tilted and hit the first peak of the closest mountain. A narrow pass was coming up ahead, two ships that had crashed into each other sticking up from the ground, at the tip of a mountain furthest from the crashing ship. The looming shadow blocked out the rising sun.

"Lance we're not gonna make it," hissed Pidge, as their way out grew smaller with every passing second.

"Yes we are," he replied, pushing the speed to the max.

"It's too narrow," said Elyta, owlish eyes wide in alarm.

"Not if I thread the needle."

Pidge frowned at him. Did he forget what happened the last time he'd tried that? In a simulator?

"Lance—" She was thrown out of her seat as he turned the entire side of the ship vertically (thank God Hunk was a good crash pillow) and she waited for something to go wrong, for them to lose a wing, for the sound of metal grinding against metal before they were crushed—

It never came. The head of their ship lightly banged into the bottom of one of the fighters sticking upright, and the engine was rattling around due to the firepower being used, but their ship cleared the pass, cleared the falling ship as it came down on top of the mountain with a mighty crash.

Hunk launched himself at Lance, along with Pidge, nearly lifting him up from the pilot seat. "You did it!" Hunk exclaimed, squeezing him before setting him down. "I mean I knew you would, no doubt about it, but jeez, that was kinda close you know—"

Pidge gave him an admiring look. "Not bad, Tailor."

"Ha, yeah!" Lance puffed out his chest importantly. "See? I knew that nickname would catch on." He glanced back at the ruined warship, and looked to Elyta. "Sorry about your mountain, though."

"No matter," said Elyta. "Set us down near the other shuttles, that landed safely?" Lance spied them and turned the ship around, over to that direction. The two shuttles were little black dots near the Hootowling village. Elyta straightened up, and squared her shoulders. "I need to address my people."

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Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will either be called "Across the Universe (III)" or "The Fall of Altea",

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although I haven't decided upon which. It will be more Altean centric, as well as some backstory to Hunk, Pidge and Lance's Garrison days. Hope you enjoy this chapter! I'd love to hear your thoughts, and thank you for all your support. If you're interested in knowing more about this fic, please check out my blog for it, known as "voltron-fix-it-fic" on tumblr!

Thank you for reading. I hope to have the next chapter out sooner than this one!
Across the Universe (III)

Chapter Summary

Final chapter of the "Across the Universe" arc. Pidge faces Elyta's decision, while Hunk and Lance reflect on humble beginnings. Allura and Coran make the hardest choice imaginable to preserve what remains of their future, and the memories of their families.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Did your letter come?

Did your letter come?

Lance's excited voice was a common sound in the Garrett household, even if it was usually in person rather than over the landline like it was now. Malae held the phone a tad away from her ear, tilting the bottom end towards her mouth so she could speak. "Sorry Lance, this is Malae—Hunk and Lili are bringing in the mail right now."

"Perfect, I'll be right over! Thanks Mrs. Garrett!"

She chuckled as she set the phone down, knowing the boy would quickly sprint over the three backyards dividing the houses, and that he'd likely be at the door just as soon as her wife and child would be, coming up from the driveway.

Sure enough, the lanky fifteen year old is grinning in her doorway, as Hunk and Lili stand on the porch steps after she's opened the door. "Did you get your letter?" he asked Hunk, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "I got mine but I haven't opened it yet, I wanted to open ours together—my family's in my backyard, waiting for us!"

"I hope you didn't trample Mrs. Wen's flowers on your way over?" said Lili, but she was smiling.

Lance grinned sheepishly. "I dunno if I would say trampled, but... I may have stepped on them a bit?"

"It's a good thing the old lady can barely see, then," said Malae.

"But we'll help you make some cookies to bring over as apology, anyway," Lili added.

Lance beamed at them. "Thank you, Mrs. Garret, and Mrs. Garret."

His family— an older brother, a sister with a swelling belly, their respective significant others, his grandparents, and his own parents—were indeed waiting for him with a celebration cake already prepared, before the boys could even rip open their letters. The letters were long, full of details and protocol and requirements, but only one sentence really mattered: We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to the Galaxy Garrison School of Space.

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"You must be kidding me," said Allura flatly, once Coran had finished speaking. They were still in the library, but had finished pouring over the thick Altean text in the search for their way back to the present.

He twisted his mustache nervously. "I wish I was, but Haggar's wormhole has closed by now. This is the only way."

Her hands bunched up into fists, and she slammed them down onto the table in front of her, leaving decent sized dents, her shoulders shaking. "We must let Altea be destroyed in order to go back to the present?"

"The force of the planet exploding is the only thing I can think of that will be powerful enough to allow us to time travel," said Coran patiently, "in addition to being an incredibly dangerous thing to attempt in the first place, but I think... princess?"

She rapidly blinked back tears, gritting her teeth and choking it down. Now wasn't the time to be emotional; it never was. "I am fine, Coran. Continue."

He gave her a sad look, his brows knit together. "Princess."

"If we had been sent back even later in time, perhaps there would be time to save Altea," she said stiffly. "But the Galra will be here by daybreak, and we have very little time left. If there is anything we must do for our castleship to be ready for departure, then please, let me know."

Coran sighed, letting go of his mustache. "We must make sure that we are within orbit of the explosion, in order to harness its energy from its electromagnetic field within the galaxy. And we should bring a spare crystal with us, because the force of the wormhole will almost completely drain the one we have, unfortunately."

"We'll have to go down to the crystal catacombs, then," Allura said. Altea in its glory days had stored and grown spare crystals from chunks of Balmeran rock, in addition to gathering crystals from Balmeras themselves, and keeping them in a storage area far below the juniberry fields near the castleship. It was a convenience of flying Altean ships that had been lost to the cosmos and time.

"Without being noticed," Coran reminded her. "Remember, in the days leading up the fall, there was increased security to make sure that only ships fully loaded with passengers could leave the planet, and they needed the most powerful crystals to power those ships."

Allura bit back a sigh. It had been ten thousand years and six months since the fall of Altea, but even only six months after waking from the cryopod, some details had been lost no matter how badly she tried to remember them. The last glimpse of her planet before the explosion was a blurry tattoo on the backs of her eyelids, nothing more than blue and green and white before it turned into a fiery explosion of debris. Saying goodbye to her friends as they were loaded into ships, before the Galra had gunned those ships down too. She shut her eyes, willing herself not to cry, and when she quickly reopened them, they were dry.

"Yes, you're right, Coran," she said simply, grateful when her voice was steady. "But I doubt anyone will question me, as the crown heir."

She was finally the princess of something again—a people, a planet—and she was going to lose them all over again.

"Or me," said Coran. "I'll go in your stead, but say I'm on your business if anyone asks. I'll bring the crystal to the backdoor entrance, near the servant's quarters."
Allura blinked, remembering sneaking out that backdoor in her youth, drawing up the hood of her cloak and changing her appearance ever so slightly, so she could sneak into town to dance and have fun with friends without being recognized as the crown princess.

Coran's mustache twitched as he added, "The one you would always sneak out of."

"Wait, you knew about that?"

"Your father and I were far more observant than you give us credit for. You are his only daughter, after all."

"I will meet you by the door in two hours?" Allura checked.

Coran nodded, closing the book and setting it upon the nearest shelf. "And not a tick later."

Allura waited until he was gone to rest her head in her hands, tears leaking out of her eyes before she hastily wiped them away. If she had been given a few more hours on Altea, she was going to use them wisely. But first, there was someone she needed to visit.

:::

"What is wrong with you?"

Pidge didn't know what had compelled her to say it, in the dimly lit hollow of Elyta's hut back in the village. The warrior had made sure her people were taking care of, guiding them back to their huts and homes, doling out food and clothing and water. Celebratory fires had been lit, and a grand feast would be taking place the following morning.

But Elyta hadn't seemed keen to join in, instead retreating to her hut, her wings drooping as she had lit a few candles, and sat down to wipe her weapons clean of Galra blood. Her younger siblings had been handed off to some kind of grandparent, to relax, but clearly she didn't think she deserved the same.

"How could you do that?" Pidge continued, planting a hand on her hip and glowering when the alien didn't respond or look up. "You left your parents there, you just left them to the Galra, how could you—"

"I did what I had to do," Elyta said, looking up sharply, and Pidge realized she was crying tears of gold. "For the greater good of my people. You think I did not want to save them? I wanted that more than anything. But if I had saved them, hundreds of others would not have gotten their parents back. It was a worthy trade..." Elyta glanced down, and golden tears dripped down her face, clinging to the short black feathers under her eyes. "Even if it hurt."

All the fire went out of Pidge, and she swallowed hard, deflating as she took a seat next to her. "I'm sorry about your family."

Elyta looked at her strangely. "What are you apologizing for? You did nothing wrong."

"It's a... custom on the planet I'm from. When a person loses someone they love, we offer condolences."

Elyta's wings drooped even further, if that was possible. "But I did not lose them... did I? The cruiser was destroyed, but do you think they were crushed—?"

"No," Pidge said firmly. "The commander and any other Galra probably had their own ships and
shuttles and escape pods to use, when it became clear the ship wasn't going to make it. They probably took your parents as hostage, or something. They still need feathers, right?"

"Right," she agreed, her voice shaking slightly. Pidge supposed the idea of her parents losing her wings was nearly as terrifying to Elyta as they thought of them being flat out dead.

Pidge placed a hand on her shoulder. "Then all you have to do is find them, and you will find them. I know you will." She sighed. "I lost my family too. My brother and my father, Matt and Sam Holt. I don't know where they are... they could be anything in the galaxy. But I know the Galra has them. That's why I'm here, and became a paladin. Or it was. So I could look for them."

Elyta glanced at her with a small smile. "And how is that working out for you, green one?"

"Not that well," she admitted. "But I can't give up hope. Because if I do that, then they really are lost."

"So what are you going to do now that you have freed my planet? Search for your family? The... the uh, Bolts?"

"Holts," Pidge corrected softly. "But right now, I need to go find the rest of my friends, so that Voltron can be assembled together. And maybe you join our alliance?" That would be what Allura would want her to ask, right?

"I will gladly join an alliance with you, green one," said Elyta. "Whatever you need to find your fellow paladins, I will provide it."

Pidge nodded her thanks. "Just give me a radio, and a couple hours to figure out the wiring. And... she looked to the front flap of the tent, where she hoped Lance and Hunk were waiting outside.

It looked like the Garrison trio really was back together again—only this time, they would win.

:::

Her mother's grave was a small thing, really, a simple grey headstone among lush green grass and pink juniberry flowers, easy to miss in the field of flowers if you didn't know where to look for it. Her mother's actual monument was near their Holy Chapel, large and grand in the shape of a smaller thrown, mirrored by her Aunt Ilura's much larger one, made of the same marble. Allura had always preferred her mother's tombstone here than the other in the Chapel. For starters, her mother's ashes were actually buried here, but it was far more personal. Anyone could make a pilgrimage and pay their respects at the Chapel. Only family was allowed to visit this one.

And as an only child and a war orphan, Allura knew she'd never be able to visit either of those places again. This was all she had left. She stopped in front of the grave, breathing deeply. This is the last time she'd get to smell the sweet scent of the juniberries, or look at Altea's magenta sky, or feel the soft breeze on her face that only came after a meteor hail shower had finished the day before.

"Mother."

Allura dropped her to her knees in front of the grave, reaching out to trace the Altean letters spelling out her mother's name, Amara Morigin of the House of the Evening Star. Underneath her transcript were more letters, reading: Queen star, sister, mother, wife, friend.

"I promise," she said hoarsely, "I will honour you. I will avenge you. Zarkon will pay for your death, and the death of our planet and our people. He will face justice, and you will finally know peace, and so will the galaxy. I know you always did what was best for our people," she paused. "No matter the
personal cost. I wish I could be as strong as you. I wish I could trust in myself, that letting Altea fall, letting people die, is necessary to secure that the future will not become worse than it already is, but... I do not know if I have that strength."

Because what if she changed things, and someone who was supposed to lived died, and someone who was supposed to die live? How much would that things ten thousand years from now? Would the ripple affect even be felt? Or would it be disastrous, and she would go back to a future with no paladins, or Voltron in Zarkon's hands? What if none of the paladins were found? Or worse, what if Shiro was trapped in Galra captivity forever, because of her choices? Or what if it saved everything, and the Galra were defeated? If that was the case, she'd be stuck in cryosleep for even longer... possibly forever, until her body gave out on its own accord, but... Wouldn't it be worth it, if millions and millions of people lived in sacrifice of it?

Allura clasped her fingers together, her knuckles tight. She'd go mad if she stayed here any longer, alone with her thoughts.

She reached beside her and plucked a few juniberry flowers, resting them near the base of the grave, and then stood up to leave. One final sentence was written above, with a lioness etched into the stone. Here lies the Red Paladin—long may she roar, and long may she reign.

Allura may not have been a paladin of Voltron; she may have been a princess without a people or a planet; a queen without a birthright or a crown; a daughter without parents. But she still had her heart, and her strength, and hope. If she could save anyone, she would. But she also wouldn't sacrifice the rest of the universe on the slim chance it might save her people. It wasn't fair, and the world, she knew all too well, wasn't fair either.

Her father had always said that, as leaders, they had to do what was right for their people, even if it meant a great sacrifice. And now he was standing only a few miles away, with no idea that by this time tomorrow he would be dead. Yet she knew that if he knew his death would keep the galaxy as safe as possible from Zarkon for the next ten thousand years, that it would keep Voltron and hope alive, that he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice himself.

The universe was bigger than Altea, even if the war wasn't much bigger than her.

And she had to remember, that perspective, was everything.

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"Need some help with that, brother?"

Coran nearly dropped the crystal in his arms. Thora was grinning on the other side of it, as he toddled towards the staircase that led up to the surface and away from the crystal catacombs. Her gingery hair was pulled back in a ponytail that curled upwards at the end like tongues of fire, the blue markings under her eyes similar to her brother's, and all those of noble Altean families.

"Oh, Thora, no—no, I can manage." He hefted the crystal more firmly in his arms, even if it felt like his spine was a second away from snapping. "I'm as strong as a Nalquod!"

Thora smiled fondly, crossing her arms over her blue and white cadet's uniform. "You and I are both aware that your strength is not what it used to be, big brother. Working in the palace has made you soft." She came up on the other side of the crystal, and eased most of it out of his arms, lessening the weight he had to carry.

Coran harrumphed, but let her help him carry it up the stairs. "If I am so soft, then why are you also
seeking a palace position?"

"Because I have a wife to provide for, while she waits for an astronomical breakthrough," Thora said, still smiling. A good six years younger, Thora had far less wrinkles around her eyes, and as a cadet in Altea's diplomatic forces, she hadn't see too much of the recent war with the Galra up close, off making alliances with other planets far far away from their system, that had yet to join the Diplomatic Galactic Union that Altea so proudly fostered.

"How is Wyrna?" Coran asked, trying to keep his voice steady. He wanted nothing more than to grab her sister and shove her into an escape pod, maybe her wife too, and get them both to safety. But he had to stay calm, and well, he was Coran Hieronymus Wimbleton Smythe—the epitome of calm!

"She's off in the Paglium quadrant, but she radios frequently. And she is making progress with her latest thesis, too, so she should be home soon." Thora sighed wistfully. "Of course, we might not stay on Altea, with the way things are going. I hate the idea of leaving you when I'm so close to securing a position here, but..."

"I think leaving the planet is a smart idea," Coran said quickly. "In fact, why wait? You could leave tonight, and go surprise her."

Thora looked at him skeptically. "I doubt King Alfor will allow me to take even a single ship for such a silly and frivolous journey, at the moment."

"Then don't ask him," Coran tried.

Thora's eyebrows shot up. "Goodness, Coran, what has gotten into you? You abide by the king's every word."

Coran sighed. "Alfor is not always right."

Her brows knit together. "Coran, is... something wrong? Do you know something the rest of us don't? What is King Alfor planning to do?"

"Nothing," said Coran, which was technically the truth. "I just... this is a dangerous time to be on Altea, and I do not want to see you be hurt."

Thora reached around the crystal and squeezed his hand. "I will be fine, brother. If anything it is you I fear for. You will follow the royal family anywhere. To glory or execution."

Coran grasped at her fingers, and never wanted to let go. The crystal thrummed between them, humming with energy. "They are my family too, sister."

"And Alfor is to you what Wyma is to me," she said simply, and he gave her a shocked look.

"Thora—"

"I've known for some time, brother," Thora said gently, and he forced himself to close his mouth. "But do not worry. I will not tell a soul the reason for your devotion to him. Now, let's get this crystal to wherever you are headed, shall we?"

Coran hid his face behind the crystal, and a tear slid down his cheek. He had never known that Thora had known, much less would be understanding, but he forced down his feelings the way he had seen Alfor and Amara and Allura do a million times, and swallowed hard.
"Yes, little sister," he managed. "Thank you."

They carried the crystal the rest of the way in silence.

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The Winged Ones were nice and all, having brought them water and some weird leafy salad to eat (it tasted better than it looked), but Lance was really starting to wish he and Hunk could sit somewhere other than the hard cold ground outside of Elyta's warrior hut.

"She and Pidge have been in there for awhile," Hunk said, a piece of purple leaf poking out of the corner of his mouth as he chewed carefully. "What do you think they're talking about?"

"Who knows?" Lance let his head loll backwards. "Maybe Pidge wants to attach mechanical wings to her paladin suit, or something."

Hunk beamed at him. "Okay, that would actually be pretty cool."

Lance perked up. "What can I say?" he puffed out his chest. "I'm a genius. And so are you."

"I'm just glad you're a better pilot now than you were at the Garrison," Hunk half-teased. "Looks like we can finally call you the tailor, and not just because you literally know how to sew."

Lance pouted slightly. His older sister Susie had always made sure he was more in touch with his 'feminine' side growing up, sewing and face masks included. "Hey, you would have helped me knit those Arusians a sweater too."

"They were pretty cute," Hunk admitted, and he was quiet for a moment, before he said, "Lance?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad I snuck out with you, that last night at the Garrison."

Lance grinned widely, his eyes bright at the revelation. "Well, yeah, of course are you are buddy! But uh... so am I. I don't think I'd be able to do all this without you, and... even if I could, I wouldn't want to."

Hunk's small smile faded, as he turned his eyes to the horizon. Their Lions and their team was still out there, after all. And, even further away, Earth, and their families. "Do you think our moms miss us? Do you think they know what happened to us?"

Lance's expression soured. "I'm sure the Garrison covered it up, the same way they blamed the Kerberos mission on Shiro... but we'll go home some day, and they'll be so excited to see us."

Hunk tried and failed to muster up a smile. "Yeah. They will be." He reached out and pulled Lance into a teary, bone-crushing hug. "At least I still have you."

Lance patted him on the back once he could breathe, and the yellow paladin loosened his hold. "You always will, buddy."

He could still remember Hunk moving in two houses over, past the wrinkly old Wens and the busy Nott family with their newborn baby boy who was too little to do anything fun with—later, the kid had brought in good babysitting money, but at five years old Lance had found him utterly boring. He'd been so excited to have a boy his age, since he was youngest of his family with a decent age gap between him and his older brother and sister. And Hunk had never disappointed him, or let him
down, not even once, like when Lance had eaten too much candy on Halloween night, stealing it from his parents' secret stash, and Hunk had stayed with him the whole night instead of going trick-or-treating himself.

Both boys looked up when Pidge and Elyta exited the hut, looking tired but not defeated.

"We need to find the other paladins," Pidge said, glancing over at where the destroyed Galra cruiser lay, broken up across the snowy mountain. "And I think I know just the way to do it."

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On the day that Altea fell, it was all of Allura's nightmares exemplified tenfold. She and Coran waited by their castleship, her lungs tightening with every passing breath that she didn't deserve to breathe, knowing what was coming and doing nothing, as fire rained down from the sky. Everything inside her trembled and broke, sharp edges poking and piercing her heart as she forced a shaking hand to bring down the door of their castleship, hidden in a field of mud and flowers that would soon be turned red with Altean blood.

For the greater good, she reminded herself, as she gripped the frame of the smaller entrance of the castleship to steady herself, before she hauled herself through the door before she could throw up whatever remained in her stomach.

It was an otherworldly experience, to stumble into the main command room of the castleship, as empty as it was whenever the paladins went off into battle, to see the castleship across the way depart from the planet and rise up in the sky, navigating through the Galra brigade. To watch her people turn as small as druinants and then into dots and nothingness, as she lifted their castleship into the air.

One would go to Arus and be a statue for ten thousand years, as the universe was destroyed all around it. The other would go back to the present in hope of salvaging whatever remained of the universe.

It was a bitter, frustrating fate, and she wondered how the gods of old could manage being so cruel.

They swerved under a Galra cruiser as one of the first white arcs that stretched across Altea began to crumble, and other white and blue and yellow ships left the atmosphere, full of soldiers or refugees she wasn't sure.

"I got to say goodbye to Thora," Coran revealed quietly, his cheeks wet with tears as they watched the destruction unfold, lasers colouring the air in angry flashes of purple and red.

"I got to say goodbye to mother," she replied, just as quietly.

It seemed in turn of letting go of one regret, they had gained one back in turn as they watched their homeland burn, when their ship jolted and nearly knocked Allura off of her steering pedestal.

"By the Ancients!" Coran spluttered, grabbing the nearest empty paladin chair to regain his balance.

"We'll have to fire back," Allura said, pulling up screens to ready the guns.

"We're not supposed to change anything—"

"If we don't defend ourselves, we won't survive to use Altea's explosion in the first place!" she snapped back, and began firing on the ship who had aimed at them. It was a smaller, sleeker vessel, and she could see how much the Galra technology of the present had improved, but how here, it and the castle were on equal ground, again. It was a strangely reassuring thought, as the castle's updated
lasers (largely thanks to Hunk and Pidge's tinkering) blasted the battleship to bits.

The explosion rocked the castle ship uneasily, as more ships sped by them and almost any and all Altean ones were destroyed no matter how hard they tried to escape.

A sleek Galra fighter sped right on by, guns whirring as it fired at a fleeing Altean ship, and her legs weakened when more guns popped up from the fighter's backside, firing at them. On instinct, her fingers curled into tight fists, and lasers streamed from the castleship, causing the fighter to explode. There was a shattering echo was the fleeing Altean ship created and disappeared inside a wormhole, as she saw the logo on the side streak within the warp: a lion etched into the side with white paint.

She hoped it wouldn't disturb the future too much, as she drew up the castle's weakened particle barrier anyway.

"Princess, look!"

Her attention snapped to Coran, and she followed his line of sight. Allura's stomach churned when he realized what he was pointing to: it was the castleship of the original timeline, and she watched, powerless, torn between remembrance and imagination to fill in the blanks. Any second now, her past self would be sealed away in the cryosleep for ten thousand years against her will, and shortly afterwards, Coran would join her.

Had Alfor forced him too, she wondered, her throat tight. Or had Coran gone willingly?

"Coran—"

"We have to ready the ship, princess," he said worriedly, and she brushed her concerns aside; there'd be time for that later.

But for now, Coran was right. If their past selves were only seconds away from being placed in cryosleep, than they were only seconds away from the deafening explosion of Altea.

She felt the familiar energy thrum through her veins, as she channelled her quintessence into creating a wormhole, and one began to glow to life, blue against the fiery backdrop of Altea as it burned, and then—

The force of the explosion nearly sent her sprawling, but she kept her head clear. They had to get back home, to the paladins, to the Lions—her heart clenched—to Shiro—and she yelled as she connected her and the castle's energy to the dying planet's. The wormhole formed fully, blue tinged with red and yellow, and it turned black and white as she willed the castleship forward, and they glided inside. The exit shut behind them immediately, spiralling arcs of electricity coming off the castle ship in waves, alarms blaring, and there was a headache building in the back of her mind, splitting her eyes apart in pain as she wielded them shut, and then—

Quiet, dark space enveloped them, stars twinkling serenely, as the wormhole they had exited was zapped from existence.

"Coran?" she croaked, broken lights flashing around the command room. Her advisor was on the floor, groaning. "Coran!"

"I'm fine, princess," he mumbled, crawling to the nearest command board. "Just...need to...check the year."

If she had overshot by even a year, or worse, come back a year too soon (who knew how the fabric of space and time would handle having two Allura and two Corans simultaneously in existence?)
they were doomed. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest, and Allura forced her eyes open, even as her
headache continued to throb.

"We... we're back to the present. A day from where we were," Coran reported, his voice lifting in
relief and joy. "We—we did it, princess!"

"Yes..." she said weakly, placing a hand on her head. Back to a future where their planet was
destroyed, and the galaxy was locked in a terrible war, and their paladins were still lost. Back to
Shiro, who hopefully hadn't succumbed to the injuries he'd sustained from Zarkon's witch. She
forced herself to continue. "We did."

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: This is the last of the "Across the Universe" arc, the next one will be made

clear/announced in the next chapter, as for which the content of which is gonna be kept

a little under wraps for now, so I hope you guys are hyped! Thank you for reading and

comments really make my day and encourage me to keep writing, so I would LOVE to

hear your thoughts. I also have a tumblr blog dedicated to this fic at "voltron-fix-it-fic"

which has loads more details and graphics and stuff revolving around this fic, if you

guys are interested.

Thanks for reading, and have a wonderful day!
Shiro's Escape

Chapter Summary

Now reunited as a team, the paladins and princess of Voltron seek to make sense of their separation, and determine the source of Zarkon’s continued pursuit of them. Disagreements of leadership threaten to tear the team’s strongest pair apart as new allies and enemies emerge.

Chapter Notes

A/N: my use of earth time and altean time (hours VS vargas, etc.) will probably be pretty sporadic. i know in the previous chapter i was using hours, and in this one i'm using vargas, so yeah just... bear with me. i'll try to figure out which one i'm going to stick with. Lil guide here:

vargas = hours
quintants = days

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC II: The Traitor

CHAPTER FOUR: Shiro's Escape
(Part One)

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By the time the radio was done, Lance had returned with the Lions, now fully functioning. Pidge felt Green hum somewhere in the reaches of her subconscious, and grinned. That was more like it. Green could now scan the crashed Galra cruiser for any signs of life (hopefully, Elyta's parents, if indeed they had escaped the crash) and now not only did she and Hunk and Lance have a way off this planet, they had a real way of finding the rest of the team, too.

"By channelling the energy of the Lions' quintessence, we can make this signal go far further out from our initial standing point," she explained, taking the nearest plug and cramming into a crevice in the Yellow Lion's paw. Hunk looked a tad apprehensive. "Hopefully, it'll reach one of the others, or someone who can help us find them."

"And you're sure the surge of energy won't fry our radio?" he asked, and laid a hand on his lion's paw. "Or hurt my lion?"

"She'll be fine," Pidge assured him. "As for frying our radio, I believe I've correctly correlated the transition of power from the wires, to the—"

"So what you mean," Lance cut in, "is that you have no clue?"
Pidge gave him a dry stare, but relented. "Yes. Unfortunately."

"Well I guess if worse comes to worse," Hunk said, "we can always just leave Hootowling and go to a planet where they'll have a radio so that we can contact the others. I know Allura said something about wormholes only have a thousand galaxy radius, or something. The others can’t have gone too far. Unless, y'know, the witch lady's magic warped it, and then..." he trailed off and gulped. "Let's just try the radio."

"We should really come up with a better name for her," said Lance thoughtfully, as Pidge finished rigging up the radio.

"What's wrong with witch lady?" Hunk pouted.

"Nothing, buddy nothing, but don't we want something with you know, pizazz? She's Zarkon's right hand lady after all."

"Witch lady suits her just fine, Lance," said Pidge sourly. "Although Shiro might know her actual name. We can ask him when we make contact with him, if you're so worried."

"I'm not worried—" Lance paused. "Well, I am, but not about the witch. I'm worried about Keith and Shiro and Allura and Coran. I mean, they're all gonna be okay, aren't they?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Pidge reminded him. "Now help me hook up the lion. We need all hands on deck."

The castleship's systems had been slowly coming back to life, caught in the middle of a night cycle when Allura and Coran had finally gotten everything booted up again. They got the replacement crystal in at the power core, and then Coran went to go check what year they were in, and—thankfully—they were in the right one, even if they were in the wrong quadrant, galaxies away from Zarkon's main command, which was both a blessing and a curse. At least they would have time before having to worry about Galra sentries, but on the other hand... who knew how far away all their paladins were.

Her hands went limp against the keyboard of her hologram, restless and knowing she was too tired to use her quintessence to look for the lions, that in a day or two when she was ready might be too late—she wasn't one to agree with Coran, but she could barely keep her eyes open, and knew for once that he was right. If she tried to do anything else, she might pass out and never wake up, and then she wouldn't be any good to anyone.

She let the keyboard dissolve, and shuffled forwards towards the closest chair: Shiro's, always in plain sight when she was piloting or giving orders. She sank into it, sighing.

She wished he was here. He knew what it was like to be responsible for the others, whereas Coran was mostly only responsible for her. Not that he didn't love the rest of the team, too, but... it was different. Often times she had felt like she was catapulting between two different types of loneliness, one as one of the two leaders of Voltron, and the other as one of the two remaining Alteans in the universe. Having Coran and Shiro by her side had made things bearable, which had made sense, because Coran had been beside her nearly her entire life, acting as a second father, a royal advisor...

Shiro, by comparison, she had only known for maybe six months. Why did his absence sting so sharply?

"—Al...an—can you—Coran—Prince—"
The sounds coming from their feed were staticky, fading in and out at best, but Allura shot to her feet, pulling up a hologram and amplifying the sound, her fingers dancing across the keypad, trying to hone in on the signal. There was no mistaking that voice.

Pidge was calling out to them.

"Pidge?" she cried over the monitor. Every second her scanner took to locate the signal made her fear it would disappear entirely. "Pidge, can you hear me?"

"—lura? Allura, are you there?"

"I'm here, Pidge." Relief broke over her, as Allura didn't know what she would have done if something had happened to her youngest paladin. They weren't particularly close, but from what she understood, Pidge's mother was already all alone back on Earth, and she was determined the woman would at the very least get her daughter back at the end of all this. "Where are you? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Pidge said joyfully. "I'm with Hunk and Lance and they're okay too—"

Allura sent up a prayer to the Ancients, and then brought up another hologram, hooking up the signal with

"We're on the planet of Hootowling, our radio is plugged into the Yellow Lion—can you find—"

"Sure can, Number Five," Coran said, speeding into the room and typing away, narrowing down the search results by typing in key words: Wylo, Hootowling, spikes in quintessence. "I'm honing in on your signal now—luckily we're not too far away Wylo quadrant—we'll be over in a tick—"

"Is Shiro with you?" Allura asked hopefully. One less journey to make, one less paladin to find.

"No," said Pidge, faltering. "He's not with you?"

"Or Keith?" Lance butted in.

"I'm sure they'll be fine as long as they have each other," said Coran cheerfully, his screen glowing green as it locked onto the quintessence of the Yellow Lion.

"But isn't Shiro injured?" Hunk said tartly, and Allura remembered that he had been there too, to help her save Shiro from that awful witch.

"Oh, well, yes," Coran faltered.

A tightness formed in Allura's chest. Keith, although impulsive, had apparently lived in one of the harshest Earthen terrains on his own for awhile. He would most likely be okay. But Shiro... maybe he was running out of time. She swallowed hard.

"We are going to find him," she said, injecting confidence into her voice. "First, Pidge, we're going to come get the three of you. Then, I'll find the Black Lion's quintessence, and we can find Shiro." It didn't matter how weak she felt right now; she'd find the strength somehow. She couldn't let Shiro die all because he'd decided to be stupidly noble and rescue her.

For the first time beyond her time in captivity, she let her brain wander, to what would have happened if she had remained Zarkon's prisoner. Perhaps he would have publicly executed her, or sent her to the rumoured gladiator ring. He would have stripped her of all dignity, surely. Possibly experimented on by his witch, and turned into one of those monstrous beasts made of blood and
metal. Maybe, if the team had waited longer, she would have come back with only one arm too.

Allura swallowed hard, closing her eyes for a moment. She couldn't dwell on what ifs, on the past, when what was happening right now was so crucial to all of their futures. She let her fingers fall away from the keyboard.

"Coran," she said, "you have Pidge's signal?"

"Loud and clear, princess," he reported. "We've locked onto all three Lions, and should be there by the start of tomorrow's daycycle. I know you'd usually wormhole us there, but," he turned slightly stern, twisting his mustache around one finger, "you've been pushing yourself awfully hard lately. You should use this time to rest."

For once, she didn't feel like putting up an argument. "You're right," she said, and he blinked in surprise.

"I am?"

She shuffled past him, her limbs feeling like lead. "Make sure the signal stays strong, and if anything happens, wake me up from my slumber. I do not want to miss anything important."

"Of course not, princess."

She already knew he had no intention of waking her up, unless the castle alarms did it for him, but left the bridge room anyway. She walked past the paladin's hallway, all their rooms collecting dust, her mother's memorial room, sealed shut, her father's empty AI chamber, before finally coming to her bedroom. She took off her battle suit and pulled on soft, worn pajamas, sighing in relief as she untucked her hair from the back of her nightgown, her fingers travelling up to her circlet, lingering.

It had been her mother, the queen's, and she hadn't taken it off, not once, since her mother had died, but... she didn't want to be royalty, now. She just wanted to be a sad, scared young woman without the weight of the universe on her shoulders, with no family and no people and no paladins.

Her fingers fell away, and the cirlet stayed on, as Allura pursed her lips. When had she ever gotten what she wanted?

She had never been more exhausted, but it still took hours for her to finally fall asleep.

:::

Winged aliens with feathers around wide, yellow eyes clustered around the Castleship after it landed. Coran had heard of them before, some vague memory far back in the castle's database, but was too consumed with anticipation to see his paladins again to care too much. Hopefully the Winged Ones had treated them nicely, as the castle doors seemed to take an eternity to enter—or something that felt like another ten thousand years, while being conscious this time.

He bounded down the ship's loading plank, spotting Hunk and Lance first, and then Pidge wedged in between them, and scooped all three of them into a bone crushing hug; Allura wasn't the only one with some super Altean strength, after all. "Oh quiznak, how I've missed you!" he cried tearfully.

Pidge slipped out of his grasp first, patting her ribs. "Missed you too," she puffed out, regaining use of her lungs.

"Oops, sorry Number Five. I got a bit ahead of myself." Coran dropped Lance and Hunk back onto their feet as well. "I can't tell you how pleased I am that your signal got through!"
"I know the princess missed me," Lance said, sidling up to Allura, and she was so glad to see him she couldn't even muster up an eye roll.

"I'm glad that you are alright too, Lance," she said. "All of you. And that this planet wasn't too hostile towards you."

"The Galra were," said Hunk. "But the locals were nice and really helpful."

"Which reminds me," Pidge turned to Allura, "there's something I have to take care of on this planet before we can leave. My Lion is conducting a scan of the Galra warship, and—"

"Pidge, we do not have time to stay on this planet for any longer than necessary," said Allura shortly. "I understand you want to look for your family, but we must locate—"

"It's not for my family. One of warriors, Elyta, is trying to see if her family died in the crash or escaped."

Allura blinked, but set her jaw. "And that is an honourable offer, Pidge, but we do not have time for such a thing. Shiro was injured in a battle with Zarkon's witch and he may not have much time left. We need to locate him as soon as possible, or we may lose him."

Pidge squared her green shoulders. "Shiro wouldn't leave someone who helped him in the dust like this. He'll be okay. He saved my brother Matt and survived the arena, and he has the Black Lion."

"Yeah, princess," said Hunk, amid the relief his Lion was no longer hooked up to Pidge's radio. "Besides, Pidge already started the scan and it's nearly complete, it'll only take another varga."

"A varga you can use to rest, princess," Coran added. "So that you can more efficiently locate Shiro once you've awaken."

For a mad moment Allura nearly snapped at all three of them, until Pidge's words sank in, and her anger faded. She knew what type of man Shiro was—even if in this moment, she didn't like it. "Yes, Pidge, you're right. I...we will wait another varga," she said reluctantly, still frowning. Part of her wanted to mingle among the local Winged Ones, but she went up to the castle instead and paced in her bedroom until the varga was up.

He had to survive, least of all to keep the guilt from breaking Pidge. He had to.

:::

The sun broke red and faint over the grey hills, as Shiro was roused from his sleep by another wave of pain from the pulsing wound in his side. The fire they'd built had died, and Keith—after insisting on keeping watch—had finally passed out and was snoring softly, but Shiro couldn't fault him for it. He knew the Lions would look after them too.

Especially Black. He still hadn't thanked her properly for saving him. What sort of paladin was he? He pushed himself to his feet, listening for a moment for any sound of the growling creatures, and finding none, limped his way over to the Black Lion, one arm curled over his injury, the other resting on her mighty paw. "Thanks girl," he croaked. "You really saved me back there."

He reached out for the familiar mental tether, a rumbling of warmth and vague colours projected in his mind, and found strangely nothing. Had he done something wrong? Had Zarkon's attempt to reclaim her done more damage than he'd thought... Had Black even wanted to leave Zarkon in the first place?
"Shiro?" He looked back at Keith, who was ambling over to him with a disapproving frown. He looked as worn out as Shiro felt. "You shouldn't be walking around like this, you—hey... Is that—"

Shiro turned around, following Keith's line of vision, and was sure that the pain was making him hallucinate. How could that be the castleship gliding towards them, the blue glow of the wormhole already fading? But no, Keith was seeing it too, as wide eyed as he was as the castle descended, radiating heat and power and stirring up the dust as it slowly landed with a clank against the stone. It was real.

For the first time since Zarkon's witch had choked him with a hand too unlike his own, Shiro felt like he could trust his own eyes again.

The castleship doors opened, and the Paladins ran down the ramp in a mess of grins and blue and yellow and green. Their shouts of joy only grew louder when they realized Keith was there too, and Shiro could feel the hum of their Lions sealed safely away in the castle, until Pidge slamming into his ribs pulled him back to reality, and he ruffled the smaller paladin's hair.

"Thank God you're okay!" she cried, tears in her eyes as her grin pressed against his chest and battered lungs.

Shiro chuckled softly, before letting out an oof as Hunk and Lance mirrored her in a four way hug. "I could say the same thing to you guys."

Lance let go and got Hunk to join in on pulling Keith into a hug, even as he squirmed against them, and Shiro smiled as Pidge joined in until Keith gave up and gave his teammates a small smile despite himself. "It's good to have you back," he said.

"It's good to be back, Number Three," Coran told Keith cheerfully, popping up beside them.

Something in Shiro's brain registered, amid the pain and happiness, that if Coran was here, than that meant...

"Allura."

She was rushing down the ramp too, slightly unkempt hair from her bun falling in her eyes as she beamed at him, at all of them, but she seemed unharmed, if tires. (He hadn't had a chance to check if she was hurt or not while escaping central command, in all the chaos.) She ran towards him, and went to throw her arms around him, halfway through before thinking better of it, her arms outstretched as hesitation passed over her face, and he gladly stepped into them, wrapping his arms loosely around her waist, and her hands tentatively, and then tightly, fell to his shoulder blades.

"I was worried we wouldn't find you in time," she mumbled, and his smile softened, even as she pulled away, looking rather embarrassed and thankfully, completely, unharmed.

"It takes more than a glowing alien wound and a fall from the upper atmosphere, to get rid of me, princess."

"Yes," Allura gave him a fond smile, turning towards where Pidge and the boys were all talking excitedly to one another, "Pidge was thinking along similar lines, too."

Shiro smiled until a pang of pain flared from his wound, and he clamped a hand over it, gritting his teeth.

"Shiro, are you alright?" she said worriedly, placing her hands on her shoulders. She could remember the way she'd helped him up from the floor after shooting down Haggar, the way his hand
had slid up to cradle hers as she helped him down the hallway, his palm warm and shaking. Now, she hoped to steady him.

"Fine..." Another wave of pain hit him, and he winced. "But a cryopod might be a good idea," he admitted.

"Of course." She raised her head to look at Coran, and barked, "Get everyone and the Lions onboard! We should get Shiro into a cryopod. Now."

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As a fighter, and a leader, you give hope. Hurry, Earth needs you! We all do.

Shiro woke up with all the grace of two trains colliding on a single track. The cryopod's walls gave way and he stumbled out, steadied just in time by Hunk, who hefted his weight up. "Whoa, Shiro—you alright there buddy?"

"Fine," he croaked, raising a palm to his temple. "Just...fuzzy. I think—" He thought of Ulaz, pale purple, Galra; the similar fuzziness of the injection (he didn't want to think what the Galra had been planning to do to him next), a gambit to find Voltron by releasing the Champion from his captors... being hurled into an escape pod. Again. "—llura—Princess—" His thoughts were tripping after one another, but he knew if he wanted any hope of understanding what he’d seen, of decoding the coordinates Ulaz had supposedly put in his arm, he needed to let her know what was at stake.

"I'm here, Shiro," the princess said, voice soft and soothing, as Hunk helped him into a sitting position on the steps, and his vision cleared as he looked up at her, concern etched onto her face. "What is it?"

"I had a dream. A memory." He rubbed at his eyes. "I... get my arm hooked up to a scanner. Now."

The team scrambled to fulfill the request, Hunk and Pidge getting the equipment set up in the tech hangar, while Allura helped Shiro walk over to it, Lance, Coran, and especially Keith, hovering nervously, as Shiro explained what he had seen best he could, even as the details of the dream slipped through his fingers like sand, and Allura’s frown deepened as he spoke, even as she helped him into his chair and Pidge plugged his arm up to her scanner.

"Are you sure this wasn't just a dream?" Lance said skeptically.

"I'm positive," Shiro said, trying not to be tart. It had taken a long time to learn when to trust his mind, and when not to, but he had never felt so sure something was real like this. He didn't need any room for doubt to start sprouting. "Someone helped me escape."

"And he was Galra?" Allura asked, barely holding back a scowl, eyes hard in disbelief.

"Yes." He tore his eyes away from Pidge’s glowing, coded screen, and frowned at her. He hadn't had much time to think about her technical betrayal—of not telling him Zarkon was the Black Paladin—but a rush of rage came sweeping in. She’d never told him that the witch who took his arm had been working for the greatest threat to the galaxy, that Zarkon had sat in his seat, had piloted his Lion, had nearly successfully stolen it back from him with no warning. How could she do that to him?

"You know you cannot trust them."

His metal fingers curled into a fist. "Your father must have trusted them once," he snapped. "Zarkon was the original Black Paladin, wasn't he?" Shiro almost regretted it the second he said it, because it
was a low blow, and they both knew it, because no one except maybe Coran had suffered more from trusting Zarkon, from blindly trusting a paladin of Voltron, that Allura had seen her people and planet burn because of that misplaced trust, but he couldn't find it in him to apologize.

Her eyes widened, mouth ajar, before her surprise (or hurt?) faded into something of guilt and shame. "That was a long time ago," she muttered, avoiding his angry gaze, and a pang of regret flickered in his chest.

"Wait, what?" Lance spluttered, and everyone else looked just as shocked, before Keith reverted to anger and crossed his arms over his chest, giving Allura a fierce glower.

"Well, yeah," he said sharply. "Didn't you see how he stole the Black Lion right out from under Shiro? Or that he could do all that cool stuff with his bayard? Shiro's bayard? You know, the black one?

Allura grit her teeth, and Shiro saw a stony calm struggle to settle over her face. "Pidge," she said, composing herself, "have you gotten all the information you can from Shiro's arm?"

"For now, yes." The Green Paladin was rapidly typing away. "I have to work on decoding everything... I guess whoever freed Shiro really didn't want anyone but him finding the coordinates, since I've never seen this level of encryption before. It's too complicated for me to even colour code; I mean, what's the Galra's problem? We're not animals."

"Then Shiro," she said tartly, "may I have a word with you? In private?"

Shiro took out the cord from his arm, and stood up, frowning. "Of course, princess," he said, his voice clipped.

They walked side by side without touching to the closest adorning hangar of the lions, over to where the Blue one stood, stoic and silent, as the door swished shut behind them. Shiro turned around to face her, and met her hard stare with one of her own, his hands clenching into fists.

There were so many things he wanted to say, all of them getting stuck in his throat until he burst, after a tense beat of silence, "Why didn't you just tell us the truth about Zarkon?" He didn't give her a chance to respond before he added, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Allura looked up at him miserably, guilt written all over her face, even as her spine remained as unbending as always. "I wanted to protect you," she began, pausing, "from the dark history of the paladins... so that you would have a chance to bond with your lion on your own. Do you honestly think you would have even been willing to touch the Black Lion at first, if you had known the truth? Would you have bonded with her so readily? Would you have let her into your mind so easily?"

The last thing he wanted to do was admit she had a point, so he stayed silent, and she continued, her voice softening and growing firm at the same time, strong in the belief of what she was saying. "I knew from the beginning that you were a prisoner of Zarkon, and that you were the perfect fit for the Black Lion, that you were worthy to be her paladin. The others, I had doubts of, but you, never. I knew from the start that you were the decisive head Voltron needed—and you still are. You are the Black Paladin now, not Zarkon."

"Yeah, well, the Black Lion may have a different take on the matter," he muttered.

Allura's brow furrowed as he avoided her eyes. "What makes you say that?"

"When we came to rescue you, we formed Voltron, but Zarkon ripped us apart." His voice softened. "He took the Black Lion right out from under me. He could have gotten the Black Lion right then
and there, since I didn't know," his anger flared right back up, "since you hadn't told me—"

"You never should have come to rescue me in the first place." Allura shot back, upset and now more mad than guilty.

"What else were we supposed to do? Leave you there to die?"

"Zarkon wouldn't have killed me—"

"You don't know that—"

"I would have survived—"

"You don't know that either—there are things in that prison worse than death, princess! Things that will make you wish you were dead! I said I wouldn't leave you and I meant it—I was supposed to protect you, and you wouldn't have left me! You wouldn't."

"Without you, the team cannot form Voltron!"

"And without you, we can barely traverse the galaxy! The team needs you as much as it needs me! I need—" He stopped short, his breath tight and controlled as he looked at the floor, and then up at her, his hands still curled into fists, but more composed now. "Look, Allura, I know that you're skeptical that this lead will actually lead to anything. But it's the first one I've ever gotten. I need—I want to know, whatever I can. You know better than anyone else what it's like to wake up and have nothing but missing blanks. This is my chance to maybe fill in one of those blanks. Please..."

Allura's eyes softened, even if her frown deepened. "We'll see where it goes," she relented. "And as for the Black Lion, we will... figure out what to do when the time comes. For now, everyone should be resting. You especially." She slowly walked up to him, and just as she started to pass him, she paused by his side, and placed a hand on his shoulder, where metal met flesh. He was warm and cold to her touch. "And Shiro..." her voice was almost gentle now. "I do not want you to be too disappointed if this does not turn out the way you wish. The Galra play many games with the mind."

He conjured up the image of the witch, impersonating the worst of himself, and then blinked it away from his mind's eye. "I know."

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It took an entire quintant for Pidge's scanner to reap results, and in the meantime, Allura wandered the castle and thought of Altea. The rest of the paladins were sleeping, as Pidge and Hunk had hooked her scanner up to an encryption code that would run without supervision until it yielded results, both equally exhausted, Lance was never one to pass up beauty sleep and had headed in before anyone else, and the training deck was void of both Keith and Shiro (she'd checked on the latter using security cameras, just to make sure he'd actually gone to his room when he'd said he would). Coran was doing last minute checks to the new crystal they'd installed to replace the depleted one, which had been taken to one of the rooms set aside for Pidge's research, to see if there was anything useful that could be found.

She didn't expect to find Lance in the observatory room, looking up at holographic stars that cast blue shadows over his face.

"Mind if I join you?"

He turned, startled from his sitting position, but she eased him back down with a wave of his hand, walking to sit down next to him. "Sorry, princess," he said, scrambling for something to boast about.
His eyes were rimmed with red, if it wasn't the light playing tricks on her eyes. "I just... couldn't quite doze off. I have amazing stamina!"

"I can see that," she said dryly. His eyes travelled back up to a cluster of planets, the name of one popping up, the Altean name translating to *Terra*. "What planet is that?" she asked, trying for a smile once his faded, "you seem particularly interested in it."

"Oh." He paused. "That's Earth."

"I see." Her lips thinned. "You miss it."

"It's hard not to," he admitted quietly. "But mostly I miss my family. Hunk does too," she got the sense the two had talked about it at length, as well, and she was more grateful than ever that the bond between two of her paladins had come so easily, stability in a chaotic world, "and Pidge has her mom back home... but I don't know if Shiro does. I don't know if he or Keith even have families."

"Everyone had one, once. They just might not remember. Or may not have met." She'd had an aunt she'd never met, her mother's sister who had died before she was born, but they shared a name save for two letters, Ilura becoming Allura in honour of her.

"Do you really think Shiro's dream was more than well, a dream?"

"I'm not sure. But he does. That's enough for me to trust him."

Lance was quiet for another moment, before he asked, "Why didn't you tell us Zarkon was the Black Paladin?" It wasn't an accusation, but simply a curious inquiry, and her tired soul was grateful for it too.

"To the universe, Altea has been gone for 10,000 years. To me, when I came out of the cryopod and you caught me... I do apologize for insulting your ears, but they did take me by surprise... to me it has only been a few months. Altea had only just fallen when I was sealed away. Zarkon had only turned a few weeks beforehand. None of us saw it coming. None of us had thought a paladin of Voltron could become something so monstrous."

"And my old paladin? What were they like?"

She smiled at the question. "Sarli? They were Galra, but they were a good person. Very jovial, and loyal, much like yourself. They had a daughter with their wife, named Marmora, who was a few years younger than I. I do not know if, or when, they fell. Where they are buried, if they were given a burial at all." Her smile faded. "I do not even know what side they were on when the time came. If they stood by my father...or by Zarkon." She sighed. "I know you did not sign up for a lifetime of fighting in space, nor for leaving your families, but you are a good paladin, Lance. We're lucky to have you. From what the others have told me, you are the one who unlocked the Blue Lion from the beginning, and allowed all of you to come to the castle in the first place."

"Well I am pretty great," he said, puffing out his chest. "But... thanks Allura. That means a lot coming from you."

Her smile returned, softer and smaller. Fatigue was finally weighing on her. Maybe it would be a good idea to get some sleep too, as she got to her feet, and Lance followed her lead. "Do you have anymore questions, before I retire for the night?" The castle's day cycle would begin again in a few vargas, after all.

"Just one." Lance's face was solemn, as the blue glow of earth and the constellations faded away. "There were a lot of times the past few days, when we were all separated... or when I wasn't sure if
we were gonna make it out of Zarkon's central command, that I thought—where I wondered if I'd ever get to go home again... do you think I ever will?"

She thought of Altea, and something inside her fractured. She wanted to tell him everything. About going home, for the last time, about her father's goodbye and her mother's grave and seeing her planet destroyed, again. But it wasn't the time or the place, and he was just a boy, barely an adult, and she swallowed hard and put on a smile.

"I'll make sure you will."

Lance smiled, bright and believing, and Allura stayed there, staring at the unblinking stars through the observatory windows, far colder and far more real than the holograms that tried to imitate them, long after he'd gone.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: one last little tidbit in regards to Sarli, they are nonbinary and use they/them and he/him pronouns. happy reading and hope you enjoyed!
Shiro's Escape II

Chapter Summary

Shiro trusts Ulaz, Allura trusts Shiro, and the hints of canon divergence truly begin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARC II: The Traitor

CHAPTER FIVE: Shiro's Escape II

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Pidge called them to the Green Lion's hangar shortly after a breakfast of goo and something that could be described as alien pancakes. "My scanner finally pulled something through, since before breakfast I added one of my personal encryption codes, and well... I found some repeating numbers in all this Galra code, and extracted it, and it seems like coordinates. They lead here: the Thaldycon system."

Shiro straightened up from her screen, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "Then that's where we're headed.

"Shiro, are you sure this isn't a trap?" Hunk asked.

"Yeah," Keith agreed, brow furrowing over his dark bangs. "After everything the Galra has done to you... they took your arm."

"It's worth the risk," Shiro said decidedly. He knew that despite his cousin's hotheadedness, "Someone helped me escape. If we can locate some allies in our fight against Zarkon, especially ones from his own side, we might find a way to take him down, only from the inside, but across the whole empire."

"We can check the location," Allura commended, taking a copy of Pidge's coordinates to plug into the mainframe of the castle. "But I do not like this."

Shiro rose to meet her stride as they all headed out of the hangar, and managed an appreciative smile. "I know."

The ship teleported to the Thaldycon System with little resistance, even if he knew, like always, creating a wormhole did drain Allura, especially with how tired they had all been since getting separated. Still, Shiro was wide awake as the ship floated near what looked like a massive cluster of strange blue and green rocks that largely resembled meteors, if they didn't glitter so much. Maybe it was the astronaut in him, but he couldn't hope to get a little closer, if only to look for the answers he so badly wanted.

"Well, this is it," said Coran, sounding vaguely disappointed at how anticlimactic it all was. "No sign of any activity at all, living or otherwise."
"Can we get in there to take a closer look?" Shiro asked.

"I don't want to bring the Castle any closer," he said, even if Allura was at the helm. "Those xanthorium chunks contain highly unstable nitrate salts. Even bumping one of them can blow us straight to Wozblay."

Shiro frowned, slightly. This was the one lead he had. It couldn't just be a bunch of dangerous rocks. It had to lead somewhere instead of back into the hellhole his head often became. "Are you sure this is right?"

"These are the coordinates Number Five gave me."

"Hey!" Pidge spoke up, crossing her arms over her chest. "My decryption is solid."

Of that, Shiro had no doubt. Pidge was one of the smartest people, and decoders, he knew, and not just because it ran in the family. She'd done things with alien technology her brother and father (and mother, by extension) had never even dreamed of. "There must be something we're missing," he managed, feeling ashamed and desperate that he was more or less grasping at straws. This wasn't what a strong leader was supposed to do, but... perhaps he wasn't being completely selfish, if this really could lead them to allies within Zarkon's own empire.

"We should get out of here," Allura said decidedly. "We've checked it out, but now, it's time to move on."

That had been their deal, after all, but something twisted in his gut. "No. There must be something more to this." There had to be. "I can feel it. I think we should wait."

He knew it was a pathetic excuse, to ask her to stay (and possibly put their lives at risk) all based on his gut feeling, and he didn't dare look around to see the hardness of her face that would surely be there. His shoulders sagged slightly, when he felt the ship shudder slightly to a halt, and drift, her hands lazily held above the steering spheres.

He thanked his lucky stars that she trusted him with this, even if she hadn't trusted him with the secret of the Black Lion. Maybe he had been too hard on her.

He looked back over his seat, and caught her eye. Thank you, princess.

She swallowed tightly, visibly, and said nothing, but she let the ship sit there, anyway, and that was what mattered. Until the castle alarm went off, anyway.

:::

Ulaz had been with the Blades of Marmora for a long time, ever since he was a young, upcoming cadet in his first year of mandatory military service, like all Galra from his home-colony of Triyx, when another cadet in his squadron named Thace Maala had pulled him into the closest empty corridor, and explained it all. It had shocked him at first that Kolivan Maala, model student and almost graduated soldier, could be a rebel, of all things... and perhaps that was part of the appeal. What, after all, could make one so talented and praised betray the very empire that gave them their status? What, more importantly, could make someone so fearless as to defy the emperor himself?

And who was he, a lowly Kyrak, to deny the summons of two upper class Yuraks, both belonging to the Maala family no less?

And now here he was, decaffeens later, breaking into this strange floating castle that had dared drift near his base. Kolivan wouldn't like it—would tell him not to engage, as the base was hidden and
couldn't be found anyway, but Ulaz didn't like sitting idly by when it was far easier and simpler to
engage. Not many people would come this far out in the Thaldecon system just to explore, and
besides... the ship wasn't Galra. And there was a reason Thace had been chosen (because, or despite,
Kolivan's wishes) for the undercover mission in Zarkon's central command instead of him.

It would be easy enough. The ship was clearly old, large and not very thin, and therefore susceptible
to the rather unknown xanthorium clusters behind him. He could easily lure them in and make them
blow themselves up if the need arose, and there were enemies rather than harmless travellers. He
didn't think they were friends.

Ever since he'd joined the Blade, he'd lost more friends than he'd gained, in more ways than one. But
that was alright. It was for the good of the galaxy. Deep down, he was still a Galra soldier, even if it
was with a Marmora mindset.

Knowledge, victory, or death.

Or sometimes, both.

:::

At first, Shiro had been glad when he and Allura had charged down the hallways together to go take
down the intruder it seemed the rest of their team couldn't. (Did Coran seriously think his
commentating was helping?) He was glad the princess would have his back, when he knew he had
overextended his reach, his glowing galra hand at the intruder's throat, but without any more reach to
strike the finishing blow, unlike the purple disguised alien, who's sword could easily come down
onto his chest. He'd been glad until their mask had fallen away, revealed a pale purple but familiar
face—"Ulaz?"—and Allura had slammed him hard against the nearest wall.

He was just glad she'd listened to him (again) even if she'd insisted on putting Ulaz in handcuffs
while escorting him to the lounge alongside Shiro and the rest of the paladins.

"I don't think this is necessary," said Shiro, a tad sullen, but Allura just crossed her arms over her
chest, her jaw set, and he knew the conversation was over.

"I will not have some quiznakking Galra soldier on the bridge of my ship!"

"If I wanted to kill you," Ulaz said, "you'd be dead already."

Shiro took a tiny step in front of her, frowning. Clearly Ulaz wasn't a diplomat by any means, and
while he didn't think the alien would attack them, he also wasn't willing to bet that Ulaz's supposed
loyalty to him would extend to the rest of his team, especially Allura. The Galra had wiped out her
people and tried to kill her, after all.

"Are you Galra threats supposed to win my trust?" she asked, her voice hard.

"I'm not trying to win your trust," Ulaz said gruffly. "I'm trying to win a war. And, because of Shiro,
we are closer than we've ever been. Our gamble on you paid off better than we could have ever
imagined. We knew you were the Champion, but we never imagined you'd be the Black Paladin of
Voltron, too."

Shiro softened, but still watched him warily. There had always been the possibility that Ulaz had just
been a Galra who had disobeyed orders by setting him free, but still loyal to Zarkon, perhaps
deciding that even if no one believed him about the location of the Blue Lion, he would send Shiro
anyway, as a guinea pig (or whatever the Galra equivalent was). He could have been lying, but
somehow, looking at him again now, Shiro was inclined to believe him. It really had been a gamble,
and almost too desperate to have been an elaborate contraption.

"When you released me," Shiro said, "you also mentioned that there were others working with you."

"Yes. We are called the Blade of Marmora, named after the daughter of the fallen Blue Paladin, Sarli. She founded the order in their honour, after the Galra attacked the planet of Altea. We've been working against the empire ever since."

"Uh, others?" Hunk said nervously. "Are they here?"

Lance elbowed him. "Hunk, can you try not to act so scared around the chained-up prisoner? It makes us seem a little lame."

Shiro sighed through his nose. Could the boys act a little more professional, for once? It didn't seem like Ulaz minded, or was surprised by Paladins that were little older than child soldiers, which made sense, after 10,000 years of war.

"I am alone on this base," Ulaz confirmed.

"What is this base you're talking about?" Allura demanded. "Shiro's coordinates just led us to this wasteland."

"The base is hidden," Ulaz explained. "Now that I know it is Shiro that has come, you are welcome to our outpost. It lies dead ahead."

Pidge's eyes lit up behind her glasses in curiosity. "Behind all the xanthorium clusters?"

He shook his head. "No. Right in front of it, in a hidden pocket of space-time."

Allura directed her attention to the castle's commlink. "Coran, are you hearing this?"

"I am picking up some kind of anomaly on the screen," he admitted. "I suppose it could be a cloaked base."

"Just fly straight for the centre of the xanthorium cluster," Ulaz instructed. "You will see."

Allura scoffed. "You think you're going to get me to destroy our ship just because you say so?"

Shiro stepped closer to her, relieved when she turned towards him, and her eyes softened too. "We came out here to find some answers," he said, both of them knowing he really meant I. Their eyes locked, as he searched her face. He knew he had the final say, and that she had trusted him twice already, largely without any reason to beyond himself, but now that they—he, was so close, were they really going to let this go. "Are we going to turn back now?" he asked her quietly, silently begging her.

"You know I trust you, Shiro," said Keith, reluctant but firm, "but this doesn't feel right."

Lance crossed his arms over his chest, sighing slightly. "And you now I hate to agree with Keith, but it's a big fat ditto for me."

"Galra could have implanted fake memories of the escape in your head," Pidge interjected, and Shiro's spirits fell further.

"Oh, come on," said Hunk, "that would be so evil! Which, of course, they are... But they'd have to come up with some molecular level storage unit, which... his hand does have. But, to be linked up to memory, it would need a direct pathway to his brain, which... yeah." He sighed.
With five out of six against him, Shiro knew his odds were low, the reasons the team presenting all reasonable, logical, and far more provable than just following a single gut feeling. The choice to stay and see and risk the destruction of their ship and all of their lives, and he knew deep down that staying would be selfish, but God, didn't he deserve to be selfish after everything he'd been through, to learn about everything he had been through? Would he really sleep any better at night, nights that were already plagued with half shaped nightmares, when knowing he'd had a chance to understand and had walked away from it? And after saving his life, wasn't Ulaz owed a chance?

He turned helplessly to Allura, his voice quiet but firm. "Ulaz freed me," he said simply, their eyes meeting again. Her face was almost unreadable, except for the glimmer of doubt in her eyes. "Without him, we wouldn't be here." I wouldn't be here.

Allura's jaw tightened, as she turned away and closed her eyes, and Shiro prepared himself to be shot down, and to not be too angry at her for it. "Fine," she said tightly, opening her eyes, and for a second Shiro thought he had misheard her. "Slow and steady, Coran. Head for the xanthorium cluster."

"Yes, Princess," said Coran, clearly hesitant over the commlink. "Beginning approach."

Shiro moved to stand beside her, their eyes meeting. She'd risk blowing up their ship just because of him? His throat tightened. "Thank you, princess," he said, as Coran counted down their immediate impact. If they really did blow up and die, he wanted those to be his last words.

But they weren't, because they didn't, a base gliding into view unlike anything he had ever seen. There was a symbol on it too, similar to the one on Ulaz's knife, like a jagged, unearthly letter 'S', and Shiro felt Keith stiffen beside him, likely preparing to attack if the need arose. He clearly didn't trust Ulaz anymore than Allura did.

"Welcome to the Blade of Marmora Communications Base Thadycon," said Ulaz, not sounding very welcoming at all. If anything, he was prideful, as he stood up from the lounge couch, his arms and feet still bound by Altean handcuffs. "Now, if you'll free me, I need to send a message to the leadership. They need to know I've made contact with Voltron."

Allura turned to Shiro, eyes sharp. "Go with him and keep an eye on him," she instructed. "I'm staying here."

"Ooh!" Hunk looked at Pidge, who was similarly excited, and then to Shiro for permission. "Can we go?"

The Black Paladin didn't have time to nod or say anything before Pidge spoke up too, smiling broadly. "I want to see how they make the space pocket!"

"I want to go too," said Lance brightly. "They're my paladin's organization, right? How cool is that!"

Allura frowned. "I don't think that's a good idea, Lance. At least one of you should stay here."

Lance sidled up to her, smirking. "You're saying you enjoy my company, princess?"

Allura rolled her eyes, groaning, and Shiro placed a hand on his shoulder, turning the boy's attention to him.

"I expect you to be waiting in your Lion's hangar and listening for the princess' orders, then," he said. It was the smallest favour he could do for the princess, knowing how much she disliked Lance's flirting, but even if he trusted Ulaz, bringing all five paladins of Voltron to the base probably wasn't the smartest move; Allura was right. "In case you need to jump into battle. Allura and Coran can
keep an eye on things from the bridge."

Allura shot him a quick, grateful smile, as Lance looked momentarily disappointed, and then puffed out his chest importantly.

"No problem Shiro. I'll be completely alert and aware of all of my surroundings." To demonstrate, he did a few karate chops with his arms, and nearly hit Keith in the face. Keith batted him away.

"Can we go now, please?" he asked Shiro irritably.

Shiro nodded, decisive. "Everyone suit up. We'll ride in the Black Lion."

"Hey," Lance called after them, as they walked out of the lounge, "I didn't mean to miss Keith!"

They barely had anytime on the base to appreciate its beauty or technical efficiency, before everything promptly went to hell. The ingenuity of its designer, a scientist apparently named Slav, did little to defend it when Galra cruisers came crashing into the galaxy. Ulaz whirled on them, yellow eyes flashing like the blade strapped to his back, the symbol of the Blade of Marmora almost glowing in anger.

"You were tracked!"

Pidge blinked, and then scowled. "What? Us?"

Keith's features narrowed in anger, faltering for a moment as he went to draw his own blade, and then thought better of it, settling for pointing an accusing finger instead. "If Zarkon knows we're here, it's because you ratted us out."

Hunk pressed his face to one of the ship's windows, backing away with a fearful look. "It's another one of Zarkon's robot—beast?—robeasts!"

"We have to get back to the ship," Shiro said decidedly.

Ulaz grabbed his arm before he could follow the rest of the team out the door, handing him a purple hard drive. "Shiro, wait. These are instructions on how to reach the Blade of Marmora headquarters. Before you go there, find out how Zarkon is tracking you. If you lead him there, our entire underground network, everything we've spent centuries building, will be lost. And tell... tell Thace Maala I'm sorry."

Shiro didn't have time to ask who Thace Maala was, but he nodded, holding the hard drive quickly and then heading to the Black Lion. The stick seemed to glow in his galra hand, and he forced a harsh breath.

If Ulaz had been able to plant coordinates in his arm, was it possible the Galra had planted a tracker, too?

"Do you really think Zarkon is tracking us?"

Shiro couldn't bring himself to look back at Keith, staring out into the space where Ulaz had died—sacrificed himself—any remnants of the Galra robeast destroyed by the xanthorium clusters, along with the Thaldycon base, too. There was a tightness in his chest, when he thought of the man who'd...
saved him, and then saved him again, all without any repayment. And now, Shiro's one lead of finding answers was gone too.

His ears pricked when he heard the doors of the observatory slide open, and Allura's voice too. He could just make out a reflection of her face in the glass, her eyes widening a bit; clearly she had thought she'd find him alone, the way he normally was. "We cannot know for sure," she said, composed as always as she smoothed her face over. "Only Ulaz knew our whereabouts.

Something less than grief but more than sadness, coupled with anger, flared in Shiro's chest, as he turned around to face her. "You don't really think Ulaz gave us up?" he said accusingly. "After he sacrificed himself?"

"Yeah!" Keith took a step towards her, still a good five feet away, his fists curling. The blade strapped to his back had a similar sheen to Ulaz's. "Maybe Zarkon found out about this place on his own. He's probably been searching for the Blade of Marmora."

Allura frowned heavily, flicking her eyes up to Shiro as she ignored Keith. "It's clear the loss of Ulaz has caused you great concern," she said rather stiffly. "But, regardless of how Zarkon located us..." Her voice softened. "We cannot stay here any longer. It isn't safe."

Keith's hair fell in front of his dark eyes. "We should meet up with the rest of Ulaz's group, finish what we started," he said vehemently, but Shiro shot him down, too, knowing that on this, at least, he and Allura still agreed.

"No. We're not going to the headquarters until we figure out how Zarkon found us. We can't risk losing the only allies we have in this war," He placed his galra hand on Keith's shoulder in an effort to placate him. He didn't think the teen would like his suspicions about his arm, and only get more upset, or worse, the others would start panicking if word spread, before they had checked it out properly. "Keith, can you leave the princess and I alone for awhile? We need to have a chat."

Keith frowned, looking like he was going to protest, but saw the firmness in Shiro's eyes and backed down. "Alright, Shiro." He uncurled his fists, stifling a yawn. It had been a long day after all. "I'll go make sure the others get some rest."

Shiro hoped that included Keith, too, but he had more pressing matters to deal with, as the door slid shut behind the Red Paladin, and he approached Allura.

"So," she said shortly, "what did you want to chat about?"

It felt like they were running around in circles, each calling for private discussions that descended into arguments, but Shiro resolved to break the pattern this time. Fighting with Allura was exhausting, and counterproductive, too. He didn't like being mad at her, especially now that this was probably their first time to breath since her capture, and she had trusted him all throughout the past couple days despite her better judgement, and the rest of the team being on her side for most of it, too.

"I think I know how the Galra is tracking us," he said, the fingers of his Galra hand folding into a fist. "But I didn't want to worry the others before I knew for sure."

Allura regarded him, stepping closer as her hostility melted away. "Which is?" she asked cautiously.

"I think they could be tracking us through my arm." He gestured with it. "Maybe when I was battling with Haggar, something was activated, or when I lost the Black Lion, but..." A crease formed in his brow. "If they would have been able to implant memories, and Ulaz was able to implant coordinates,
then why wouldn't the Galra put a tracker in my arm?"

"Galra trackers are sophisticated devices with only a range of a few galaxies," she said. "Or at least they were in my day."

"It's been ten thousand years, though," he pointed out. "Their technology has surely advanced. Have you ever seen anything like my arm before?"

"The Galra were always talented at building bionics. Second only to Alteans. If I had to make a guess, I would say the fluidity of yours and the way it powers up is based off the *E-Drule 4th Quarter* model."

"Drule?"

"The Galra word for power. I was tutored in many languages, Galran being one of them, although how much of the language has changed in the past 10,000 years, I don't know."

"Is that why you were able to speak fluently with the guards, when we broke in to the transport ship?" he asked, remembering how she'd had to stall at the door, before slamming it against one of the sentries entirely.

A smile played across her lips, and he knew she was thinking of the same thing. "Something like that." Her smile faded. "And if the language has changed, I suppose it stands to reason that their technology would have as well." She reached over, and placed a hand over his fist, uncurling his metal fingers, as though looking for any signs of a tracking device. "Will you have peace, until you know?"

Shiro shook his head. "And I mean what I said to Keith. I don't want to go look for the Blade of Marmora until I know I won't put them, or anyone else, in danger."

Allura nodded, and pursed her lips. "You really think we can trust Ulaz?"

He nodded too. "I do. You know, the reason I trusted Ulaz was similar to the reason I trusted you, when we first met," he said. "I could just tell that, somehow, you weren't going to hurt me, and after being hurt by so many others..."

Allura's eyes softened like stars, as she let go of his hand. "I know we haven't always seen eye-to-eye lately, Shiro, but... I am thankful you came to rescue me, even if it was foolish, I..." She lowered her eyes, her voice growing quieter. "I would have done the same for you."

Shiro slowly turned to her, a thank you getting lodged in his throat, as a more pressing question burned in his mouth. "Why did you trust me?" he asked, watching the blue light of the screens shine on her face. "Today? When we met?"

"You offered to help me when I had nothing," she said, the corners of her mouth lifting, as she raised her head. "And as for today, you have never led me astray before. You still never have. It may not have worked out the way I expected it too, or the way you hoped it too, but we still have far more information than we did at the start. That's not nothing."

This time, he managed it. "Thank you, princess."

"Of course," she said. "As for your... we can figure out if the Galra are tracking us through your arm, but we do not have the skills to do it ourselves. We must go to the Olkari."

"The Olkari?" he repeated, raising a brow.
"Engineers in tune with the bioelectricity of their planet, and most malleable materials. They'll be able to check the technological history of your arm, and extract a tracker, if it's there."

Relief broke over him in waves that unlike the prison, there was a way out this time. "How far away are they?"

"A few systems. But we should give the Lions and the castle a bit of time to recharge after the battle, the clusters did damage them. We can wormhole over to their system tomorrow. For now, we should all get some rest."

Shiro smiled at her. "You too, princess."

And they walked out of the observatory, together.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, canon is starting to diverge, and it will only become more prominent from this time on. Some episodes will loosely follow the format of others in s2, as s2 overall was pretty well structured, just with disproportionate screen time and some plot threads handled very, very badly, which is what this fic plans to fix before we move onto s3. Hopefully the next chapter will come soon, but I can promise it'll have lots of Hunk, and some Pidge, backstory and character expansion, and more shallura of course, so stay tuned! :) Thank you so much for your comments guys, I really REALLY appreciate them and would love to read more <3
Chapter Summary

Team Voltron arrives on Galra-infested Olkarion. Results are waited upon.

The air of the castleship was cool and the day-cycle dawning softly, when the planet of Olkarion drifted into view a few days later. It was still at the edge of the galaxy, known as Ooyx 8, probably due to tiny moons that orbit the sun with nothing else, in a perpetual figure eight, as white spores started sticking to the bridge windows, and Shiro frowned as he looked up from his cup of coffee (or the Altean equivalent, anyway).

"What are those?" he asked Allura. They were always the first ones up.

"I don't know. Perhaps planetary residue?" she suggested, her own mug of coffee in hand. "I only visited the Olkari once with my father. Coran is more familiar with them, and their inventions."

He'd shown them and the rest of the team his special voice recording cube yesterday morning, when Allura had announced their new trajectory.

Shiro's brow furrowed as the white spores slowly unstuck. They didn't seem dangerous, but you could never really know for sure, out here in space. "We have some repairs to still finish up, don't we? The paladins and I can check it out then, and make sure we're all good to go before we land on the planet."

She arched an eyebrow. "Are you sure you can handle a somoflange? They can be quite a sensitive piece of technology."

It coaxed a smile out of him, as he finished his coffee. "I'm sure Hunk and Pidge can figure it out, but we'll keep you and Coran on the commlink, just in case." His smile turned grateful when she took his empty mug from him. "I'll go wake up the others, princess, but keep an eye on those spores."

"I think I can manage," she said dryly, and he nearly laughed.

It was easy to forget what information could be awaiting him on Olkari, when he was with her.

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After being attacked by floating spores while repairing the somoflange (or rather, while Pidge and Hunk did so, with some tweaking) and the subsequent snowball-esque fight that had followed, courtesy of Lance, Shiro was glad when the coordinates found in the spores were successfully decoded, now that they knew they were going to land on a Galra-occupied planet. They would have to be ready for a fight.

That, and Pidge's tech skills would never fail to amaze him, even if Shiro knew it ran in her family. Matt had been gifted too, and Sam Holt had been one of the smartest people to this day that Shiro had ever met, even while traversing the galaxy. Matt hadn't gotten a chance to use his knowledge in prison, confined to a place that only valued the broad strength that Shiro had, but he dreaded to think what either of the captured Holts could be producing under the demand of the Galra.
The sooner they were found, the better, not just for them or Pidge, but for the galaxy itself.

He found Allura typing away in the main room, running the coordinates through and charting their course to Olkarion. It was a relief that the distress call came from the planet they were heading towards anyway, as Shiro knew she would have answered it before seeking out answers of whether his arm was a tracker, but... there was still a nagging feeling of wanted to know exactly what she would have chosen. Just a day ago he would have thought she would never trust a Galra, and yet she had anyway, for him. Had chosen to follow his judgement over everyone's, even her own.

He crossed his arms as he came up beside her, and jerked his head towards the images displayed on the holoscreens in front of her. They were of the Olkari people and architecture, mainly. "What do we know about them?"

Allura spared him a side glance. "They were a fairly ancient civilization even before the war, so they are beyond that now. They are some of the greatest engineers, architects, and doctors in the world. The ability that allows them to manipulate the bioelectricity of their environment also applies to one another, but not necessarily other alien species, at least not without years of training... their military was also quite strong as a result, but since everyone wanted their designs, they never had a war to fight. An Olkari scientist helped my father create Voltron, and Coran received a floating cube from him—" Allura smiled a little wistfully; it had been a simpler time, for everyone. "I think they were sweet on one another, however briefly."

Shiro's eyes rested on her. "You really miss Altea, don't you?"

Allura's smile faded, her whole expression faltering. Something seemed to flash behind her eyes only that she could see, her fingers pausing against the holoscreens, curling in on themselves slightly, and he felt guilty for dredging up the past. For the universe it had been 10,000 years, but for her, it must have felt like only four months ago since she'd lost her people when stumbling out of the cryopod.

Her voice was quiet but not unkind as she replied, "More than you know."

Shiro was silent for a long time, before he said, "Have you eaten recently?" He knew he and the Paladins have after getting cleaned up from their escapade outside of the ship with the spores, but he didn't remember seeing Allura settle down to eat something."

"I..." There was no lying to those eyes, especially not when they were so kind. "May have skipped on breakfast," she mumbled.

"Go eat, then, before we arrive on Olkarion. I'll watch the bridge, let you know if anything comes up." Allura bowed her head slightly, flashing him an appreciative look. She squeezed the crook of his elbow when she went to pass him, his prosthetic surprisingly warm under his shirt. "Thank you Shiro. I promise, once we free the Olkari, we'll find our answer too." Her fingers trailed down to the tip of his elbow, before she let go.

He only prayed she was right.

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Olkarion was a slanted, brown planet with orange hues, as the Castleship descended through the atmosphere. Massive mountains sprouted out, clear as day even while approaching outside of the orbit within Ooyx 8, and the planet attached to the ranges was equally as awe-inspiring, with towering skyscrapers and trees. The spore coordinates had been deciphered to have come from the
forest, so Shiro led the paladins in a broad-arched flanking fly, bypassing the city completely and instead gliding over the forest.

"Why doesn't anyone ever send a distress signal from a cool place?" Pidge grumbled. "I hate the outdoors. Nothing but sunburn and poison oak."

"I like it out here," said Keith. "It's quiet."

Well, no wonder he'd liked living alone in a shack in the middle of the desert, Shiro thought dryly, too alert to truly be amused, but it was a nice thought none the less. And whatever Pidge and Keith said, Shiro thought Olkarion was beautiful. The planet seemed to be stuck in a state of perpetual sunset, a warm orange glow basking over everything, and it was moments like this that reminded him why he'd fallen in love with space in the first place.

And then the peace was broken when an arrow-like object flew towards his Lion and landed straight in Black's chest, bonking off and seemingly harmless, until he felt his Lion beginning to sink towards the trees until it landed on the ground alongside the others—"Something's pulling Blue down too," Lance reported, thankfully sticking to Garrison protocol—and they saw people Shiro could only describe as tree walkers.

They resembled insects, with bony bodies and buggy eyes of various colours, their skin like the underbelly of a forest toad but smoother, mushroom white and brown. Antenna-like lumps made up their eyebrows, and on the backs of their heads on either side of their neck, brown flaps of skin or pigment pulled over the tops of their heads and brows like snug, small caps.

"Are those wooden mech suits?" Hunk asked, it and drew Shiro's attention to the hulking green and brown giants lumbering beside the aliens, seemingly made of tree bark but animated with something more electric. Bioelectricity of their environment, Shiro remembered; these must be the Olkari.

"Are you kidding me?" Lance complained. "We got taken down by a bunch of tree people!"

So much for following Garrison protocol. It was a good thing no one could hear their commfeed outside of the cockpits, as Shiro switched his transmitter on and channelled his best diplomat voice (learned from observing Allura herself) as it broadcasted outside his Lion. "We come in peace!" he announced.

One of the older looking Olkari, female, stepped forward, defined by the grey sash thrown over one side of the matching white tunics the rest of the Olkari wore. "Could it be?" she said, and he could barely make out her voice. "Voltron?"

Pidge climbed out of a hatch of the Green Lion, and held the containment unit containing the spores proudly. "We found your distress signal!"

The older Olkari gasped, "Praise Lubos!" and the Olkari echoed the name. Was it some kind of god, Shiro wondered.

He'd find out soon enough. And, hopefully, the answers about his arm could come after.

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It would take some time, to master the nearly magical headgear the Olkari had gifted them with, before they could rescue poor King Lubos from the evil clutches of the Galra. From the high branches of the forest, Pidge could see glimpses of the enslaved Olkari, forced to stand for hours by giant cubes (not unlike the one Coran had proudly shown off on the castleship), only these ones were coloured black and pulsing with purple light of the Galra empire...
How dare the Galra take these amazing engineers and architects and force them to use their abilities like this? What if the Galra were forcing her father and brother to do the same with their talents? Her throat tightened. In that moment, she envied Elyta, for being able to go immediately looking for her family; for making the choice to lose them in the first place.

"Pidge?" Hunk's voice was clear through her commlink, as he was only a few branches over. The two had been given this section of the forest to experiment, Lance and Keith the other, while Shiro had gone to update Allura and find out as much information as he could from the stand-in Chief of the Olkari, Ryner. "You okay?"

She realized vines had started sprouting and growing twisted thorns beneath her hands on the tree. She quickly took her hand and willed the vines away, and they shrank back, glowing green like the circlet Ryner had placed on her head, same as all the others. "Yeah. Just... my family would have loved, seeing this."

Hunk sighed. "Yeah, mine too. My mom was an engineer."

Pidge perked up; how hadn't she known that? "Really? Where'd she go to school?"

She could hear Hunk's smile over the link. "Institute of Formal 27th Century Living. That's where she met my mum. Guess there's still things we have to learn about each other, huh?"

"Yeah, well, I'd rather learn more about you than Lance," she teased. "At least you understand B.L.I.P.-tech."

"Well he understands homesickness as much as either of us do," Hunk said, his tone softening, and Pidge's smile faltered. Yeah, he was right. She listened to the sound of Hunk's jetpack, looking up when the Yellow Paladin landed in front of her on his branch. His own circlet was laden over his headband.

"Why do you never take that thing off, anyway?" Pidge asked.

Hunk gave her a soft grin. "I did a bit of martial arts as a kid but never got beyond my yellow belt. My mother told me to always keep something handy, in case I got grease on my face when I helped her with her projects. She always told me to remember to keep moving forward, to never take any steps back. 1-0-1, y'know. Like binary."

Of course, all commands need to come as binary coded messages, Ryner had said. Why did that sound so wrong, suddenly?

"Have you ever felt like you don't fit into the binary?" Pidge said hesitantly.

Hunk studied her, taking a step closer. "What do you mean?"

Pidge avoided his gaze. "I just mean, on earth, they try to fit us in all of these boxes. Jock or nerd, cool or uncool... boy or girl. But in space, for so many of these new races, none of that applies, and it's so freeing, but—but I still feel like I'm trapped, somehow. That either I'll find my family, or I won't, and I don't..."

"I know my moms don't," Hunk said. "I mean, they pretty much do, but you know, some people will always be buttheads."

A smile crept over her face. "Buttheads?"

"Shiro says we can't swear in front of you."
"My older brother was Matt, I think I can handle it."

"But I do think I know what you mean," Hunk continued, sitting down next to her and letting his legs dangle over one side of the thick branch. Pidge joined him. "I love cooking, and engineering, and one of my moms is really good at either, so it feels like depending on which one I pick, I'm picking one of them over the other..." His face fell. "I know it's kinda dumb, though, to think about things that'll happen when we get back to Earth, that might be a really long time from now. Things that seemed so important on Earth don't matter that much anymore now."

Pidge placed a tiny hand on his shoulder. "I know I came to space to find my family, and my brother... but I think I just found four more. I'm really glad I have you Hunk, and everyone else."

They shared a smile, Hunk's like sunshine. "I'm glad I have you too, Pidge." His eyes were level with the circlet one her head. "I guess we should get back to practicing, huh?"

Pidge pushed herself up and offered him a hand. Her whole body felt lighter. "Guess so."

Hunk accepted it, and then dusted his hands off on his legs as she turned back to the tree trunk. "And Pidge?" She looked back at him. "Whatever side of the binary you're on, I'm here for you."

Flowers sprouted between their feet. "I know."

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Shiro had known false gods in captivity, prisoners with hands or appendages clasped in prayer, murmuring for mercy or begging for last rites, before being thrown into the arena to never return. Or, like him, if they did, never the same. He had never expected that Lubos would be a false king, one that had thrown his loyal people under the bus to save his own hide, and yet still call himself a leader. He'd sat in lavish captivity while his people were starved and beaten, and they had wasted valuable time trying to rescue him (even if they had ultimately succeeded). It made Shiro feel sick and angry, his Galra arm pulsing, but he quickly made it simmer down. It wouldn't do anyone any good for his arm to start causing damage in the abodes the Olkari had given them for a night, after a celebration feast.

Now that the Galra's weaponized cube had been defeated, and Lubos turned over to the Olkari to be tried by their laws, Coran had brought out his cube and almost everyone else was outside, enjoying it's echoing feature. The walls inside the hut were inscribed with markings of the Olkari language, angular and shaped like triangles for the most part, and all gibberish to him. There was so much in the universe he still didn't know. So much the Olkari unknowingly held in their hands, in deciding the fate of his. He and Allura had agreed to wait until early morning to speak with them.

"Oh, I was wondering where you'd went."

Shiro turned at the sound of Keith's voice, the Red Paladin setting aside the purple curtain at the door of the hut. Distantly, Shiro could hear Lance leading the Olkari in a cheer where he said vol and they said tron.

"Neither us were ever really party people," he admitted with a shrug. It had been that way at the Garrison too.

Keith hesitated before stepping forward. "When I was out with Lance in the forest, while we were practicing with the circlets..." Keith removed his from his dark hair, turning it over in his hands the way Shiro had seen him do with his knife a million times.

"You didn't get into a fight did you?" Shiro asked when the silence stretched on. He'd thought the
boys, in spite of their bickering, would have been able to handle.

"No, well yes, but it wasn't bad. Just... Lance being Lance." Keith set the circlet down on the windowsill. "And me being me, I guess, but the other day, with the Blade of Marmora, and the previous Blue Paladin being Galra... do you think, maybe, my previous paladin could have been Galra too?"

"I suppose it's possible," Shiro said slowly, "but I'm not sure how much that matters. What happened in the past is in the past, after all. Zarkon was my predecessor, and..." And what?

"You're nothing like Zarkon," Keith said fiercely, all hesitance faded.

Shiro gave him a small smile. "Did Lance say something about your paladin being Galra?"

"What? No. I've just been thinking about it, since Ulaz died. I mean, clearly not all Galra are evil."

Shiro placed a hand on his shoulder. "Maybe not, but for now, let's focus on the new ally we do have: the Olkari." They'd won the Olkari's loyalty in addition to getting rid of the Galra, and he knew that Ryner, unlike Lubos, would keep her promises.

Keith's shoulders slumped, but he nodded. "Yeah, yeah, you're right." He glanced behind him. The Vol-tron chant had given way to the sound of music, synthesized and woodwind-based all at once. "I think I might go re-join the party. Hunk and one of the Ryner's friends might have finished the snacks they were making. Wanna join?"

"You go ahead," Shiro told him. "I'll check up soon."

Keith gave him a doubtful look, but left the tent, the purple curtain flapping behind him.

Once he was gone, Shiro looked down at his arm. Tomorrow, tomorrow he would have answers. Tonight, he just wouldn't sleep.

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It was hard to tell how time was passing, when the sky never seemed to change on Olkarion, but Allura managed, creeping down to the Olkari's village in what the castle said was early dawn, and she found Shiro sitting outside the small collection of huts the paladins had been given; she could hear Lance and Hunk snoring as she passed the one to the left.

Shiro shot to his feet. He looked terrible, a deep furrow etched into his brow and heavy bags under his eyes. "Princess. I wasn't expecting you."

A smile played across her lips, as she said a phrase she'd heard Lance recite, when quoting old moving-pictures back on Earth. "At ease, soldier." It coaxed a smile out of Shiro, anyway, so she didn't feel too silly for saying it. In fact, she felt rather proud, and confident she'd used it in the right context. It seemed right anyway. But she shook those thoughts away, as she went to stand beside him. "I trust Lubos' betrayal has rattled you?"

Shiro's face closed up, and they both looked at the horizon, the skyscraper trees and soft sunlight ghosting through the leaves and gaps between branches. "I can't believe a king would so something like that. Just surrender to save his own hide."

Allura's voice was calm. "My father would be angry with him as well." Her father had chosen not to fight as well (twice, now) but he had loved his people, so much he had surely died for them. Lubos was just selfish and cowardly, and nothing that a good leader was supposed to be. Nothing like her
father, or Shiro, or even herself. Allura glanced at him. "You're more like him than you know."

Shiro looked at her, his eyebrows raised. "I am?"

"You're both honest and true leaders."

A faint flush coloured his cheeks, but it might have been the pink hue to the sky playing tricks on her eyes. "The same could be said of you, princess. And Lubos is not worth my thoughts."

She took a small step closer. "Than what is?" His metal hand curled into a fist, and she understood. "I have been thinking of that as well."

"I formulated a plan, last night," he revealed quietly. Anything louder felt like it would disturb the dewy peace settling over the planet, like it would bring the Galra crashing in due to however they were being tracked. "If it is in my arm, and they can't remove it quickly, leave me here, and—"

"What?"

"—and take the Black Lion with you. You can always find another pilot in the meantime."

Allura shook her head, her mouth a thin firm line. "I'm not leaving you," she said. Purple walls and soldiers—a proud smile and soft eyes—flashed in his mind. "I stand by what I said before. You are the Black Paladin. I've known from the moment you stood by me that first day in the castleship. You said you were with me. I am with you. We are not leaving Olkarion without you, tracker or no."

"But if it is me—"

"Your arm is not you—"

"It's a part of me, Allura—"

"And I refuse to lose all of you! I have suffered enough losses, enough blows. You think I have not considered the possibility of your arm holding the tracker? That I have not feared it as you have? It is your hand—and you are my right hand. I do not know if I could lead Voltron without you, but it would not be hardly as efficient, as effective. I do not want to find out. I... I need you to be the leader of Voltron. Please, Shiro. Do this for me."

He softened, and then grew steady in the way she had come to expect. He stepped closer to her. The sunlight shone in between them. "I already have," he murmured. "I... I will try to continue to do so, Princess."

"Thank you, Shiro," Allura said softly. She held his gaze for a long moment, and then cast her gaze over to the village below them. "I expect they will be ready to speak with us, soon. Come Shiro. Let us find out if you need a new arm or not."

Thace Maala was no fool; he knew he was running out of time. Time to grieve. (Ulaz—no). Time to find an alibi. (He'd wiped the computer mainframe, replaced it with false footage to mask his presence in central command when he'd lowered the shields, but would it be enough?) Time to hide. (In a military school corridor, Ulaz's face hovering in the gloom; Ulaz's photo in his pocket; lingering glances when Kolivan wasn't around—heartbreak heartbreak heartbreak—)

Haggar's prying eyes and dark druids were everywhere, after all. He hadn't spent all this time working his way up to central command, into Zarkon's main ship, lying and keeping quiet, a double
agent for the Blade, just to be an informant. Just for the hope of a better galaxy for the greater good, for knowledge—no, he wouldn't die for the knowledge his brother Kolivan had sent him to find. He wasn't that selfless. He had been at central command for only a few months, and now it was time to start finding the information that mattered.

He waited until one of the lesser habited computer rooms, still connected to the mainframe, was empty, and slipped inside. His fingers flew over the keys, knowing he didn't have much time, but ever since the Red Lion had been found by the Galra and then stolen by the Paladins of Voltron, he had to wonder if the mission to check up on the Blue Lion had been recorded. If his hunch was indeed correct, now that he had proof the Lion existed.

"Computer," he said, voice quiet, and yet it echoed around the room. He wondered if it was indeed as shaky as it sounded. "Find Orilla Maala."
Chapter Summary

The Galra attack, and feelings start to shift.

Chapter Notes

s7 spoilers ahead, but basically what it boils down to, now that s7 has basically ruined the show for me beyond repair, i'll be doubling down on my devotion to this fic and attempt for weekly updates at the bare minimum. check out my blog voltron-fix-it-fic, or shiroallura on tumblr under the "fix it fic" for more information as to what exactly this fic will encompass. at the very least, it'll keep shiro as the endgame black paladin, allura as black paladin when he goes missing, a much shorter clone and vastly different clone arc, and the fic will go all the way until what i see as a fitting end for the entire show's conclusion. it's going to be a long, and amazing ride, and i hope you're inclined to agree, when all is said and done.

without further ado, here's chapter seven.

ARC II: The Traitor

CHAPTER SEVEN: Eye of the Storm

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"It's not it."

Shiro felt like he could breathe again for the first time in five days. "It's not?"

Ryner looked at him, blinking slowly. "I have seen many tracking devices come and go. I have built many of them. Your arm, while advanced and deadly Galra tech, is not one of them. It may yet have another purpose, as it seems you have discovered, but is not a tracking device. How the Galra are tracking you, however, I am unsure."

"At least this is one avenue closed," Allura said quietly, in her chair beside him, "so that we can focus on other possibilities." She rose and took a step to the door, standing behind Shiro's chair. "Thank you, Ryner. Myself and the paladins of Voltron appreciate your help greatly. If you may excuse us, Shiro and I should get back to them."

The Olkari bowed her head sagely. "Of course, princess. Thank you for trusting my judgement with something this important."

Shiro felt movement came back to his limbs, including his Galra one, as he and Allura left Ryner's tree hut and moved into the sunlight of mid-day. Ryner's check had been time consuming, but thorough, and he felt confident in her judgement. Confident enough to not worry about her being
wrong, even if he did know it didn't solve all his problems. There was still the issue of Zarkon stealing the Black Lion out from under him at central command that'd he have to contend with, and they'd still have to figure out how they were being tracked, but... For now, he was going to appreciate that it wasn't him, and that he wouldn't have to leave his team (not that he thought Allura would have let him, anyway).

"D'you think the other are awake yet?" Shiro asked her, when he finally found his voice.

Allura gave him a small smile, her eyes resting on him, as though patiently waiting for him to say something. "If not, let them rest. I thought we might see what intel the Galra had been story here, if any. It might help us coordinate our next move. If the Olkari were building weapons, they must have been shipped somewhere."

"Good idea."

She turned towards the horizon, as they walked down the ramps. "As good as you hiding in the trash-bin?"

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. The idea had seemed a bit like a punishment for insisting his way onto the mission at the time, but it had been more than worth it, to keep her safe. Besides, he could laugh about it now. "It was effective, wasn't it?"

She spared him a smile, eyes twinkling mischievously. "I suppose so." He stopped halfway down a descending ramp, suddenly solemn, and she got a few steps before she stopped too, turning to face him with her brow furrowed. "Shiro?"

"What if we can't figure out how Zarkon's tracking us?"

She took a step towards him. "We will."

"But if we—"

"You wished it would be you," she realized, her jaw going a tad slack as she stared up at him. "So you could have answers. So you could protect us."

"If it was me," he said, "I could at least keep us safe. Now, we have no idea."

"We've had no ideas before. About how to form Voltron." Her lips twitched upwards, as she gestured to herself. "About how to rescue me. We will find answers, and allies, just like we have today. Just... what is it you are always telling Keith?"

He gave her a small smile. "Patience—"

"—yields focus," they finished together, and she reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "You will simply have to be patient, then, won't you?"

He fell into step beside her again, as they moved back towards where they were headed. Towards progress, of some kind. "I suppose I will," he admitted.

Waiting by her side would make everything better, after all.

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Team Voltron prepared to leave once the Olkari intel was finished downloading in the Castle of Lions. The Olkari were celebratory, teary, and cheerful, bidding their new allies goodbye, and Allura
was confident they'd be alright. They had a freed planet, a good infrastructure, and Ryner to lead them. The paladins had stored their Lions in the Castle, and now it was for the last of the pleasantries, as she and Ryner shook hands.

"I look forward to being allies with you and Voltron, princess."

Allura smiled. "And I as well."

Her gaze drifted over to Shiro, who was corralling the other paladins towards the Castle's ramp, her smile still on her face as her eyes settled on him, when the sky split open and the Galra attacked. A looming purple cruiser and fighter jets broke out from the cosmos, descending, an ion cannon perched atop the cruiser, and the Olkari turned and ran to their homes in a stampede. The Olkari were just as big as the paladins, and she largely lost sight of her team as the crowd grew larger, more desperate, and Allura tried to see if the paladins were near the ramp of the Castle, but they were nowhere to be found.

Even the tallest, Shiro, was nowhere to be found, and her heart got stuck in her throat as she turned to a panicked Ryner.

"What's going on?" Allura asked, fighting to keep her voice steady.

Ryner's face turned from panic to despair. "When we reclaimed their city and dismantled the weapons they were forcing us to build, it must have sent a message to them somehow. They've come to annihilate us."

"No," came a ragged voice, followed by a cough, and everything felt more manageable as Shiro appeared by Ryner's side, immediately fitting himself next to Allura. His face was set, even if she could see the emotions raging behind his grey eyes. "They're not. Princess, I know you don't like fleeing, but if they're tracking us—"

"—then we should lead them away from the planet," she finished, and he nodded. "Contact the paladins and get them in the castle if they're not already, I'll get a wormhole going." She quickly turned to Ryner, and handed her the same device she had given to the Arusians before living Arus, a blue and white homing chip. "If it doesn't work and you need our assistance, contact us with this and we'll come as soon as we can. Thank you for all you've done. Shiro, let's go."

He nodded and set off towards the Castle, and she was relieved to see Pidge and Keith already near the archway, with Hunk and Lance coming up behind them, when Coran's voice crackled over her commlink. "I've prepared us for liftoff, princess, all we need is the Lions and then we can attack—"

"We're leaving the planet," Shiro cut in, and she was grateful as he relayed the plan to the team, a strange breathlessness clogging up her chest as they ran to the bridge, the other paladins joining them.

"Are you really sure that's a good idea?" Keith said, even as he got into his chair, looking to Allura as though it was her idea. The other paladins did too.

"It's the best way to protect the Olkari, so yes," Shiro said, rather patiently as Allura placed her hands over the steering and felt it stir to life, and she watched him get to his command, but remained standing the same way as her. They had barely gotten the Castle up in the air when laser beams and fire rained down on them from above, and the castle quaked, and Allura found Shiro looking back at her once she steadied herself. "Allura, can you evade these fighters? We can't have them following us through the wormhole."
She met his eyes, and drew on his strength. "I can try."

"Keith, Lance, let's lay down some covering fire," he ordered, and the boys snapped to attention. It didn't take long for them to dissolve into bickering, and only a little longer for their gun spheres to go offline, but Allura saw a moon and seized upon the idea. Its gravity would help them put some distance between them and the Galra, and she felt her chest contract when she guided the Castleship through the wormhole.

Her legs grew unsteady when an alarm blared, and Coran announced, "The Teludav lens malfunctioned! We're about to exit this wormhole a lot sooner than we planned!"

They emerged into open space that resembled a graveyard of floating, green-white jagged icebergs, drifting aimlessly and with no clear source of gravity. Still, they were clearly far away from Olkarion, and hadn't been followed through the wormhole, nor was their commlink being opened up by Ryner's homing chip, and the knowledge that they were at least safe temporarily was enough for Allura's adrenaline, and her legs, to give out on her.

Somehow, Shiro caught her before she hit the ground, his arms around her shoulders and him on his knees, and she looked blearily into his concerned face, the castle's crystal above framing a halo around his head. He looked like the Lion Goddess' winged servants, the agan'els, she thought, dazed.

"Princess, are you alright?"

His arms were warm and strong. "I'm fine," she mumbled, sensing Coran crouching beside her on her other side.

"Oh no," Coran tutted, "you look exhausted. You must rest. You've been exerting way too much energy...I'll go check on the main turbine and figure out what's going—"

"I can't leave things unsupervised," she coughed.

"You won't be," Shiro said, helping her into a sitting position. Coran grabbed her other arm to ease her into it. "I'll stay here and watch over the bridge, while you and the other Paladins get some sleep." He tore his gaze away from her to shoot a pointed look at the Paladins, and Hunk at least got the gist, grabbing Lance and Keith's arms and tugging them over to the door; Pidge trailed along, clutching her datapad.

Allura frowned deeply. "But you are as tired as—"

"No, I'm not," he said gently, but firmly. "You just collapsed princess. You need rest. And if you don't get it, who knows if you'll even be able to wormhole the next time we need to?"

"C'mon princess," Coran chirped. "You know Shiro. He'll so a spiff and span job, fine as a flaxernaff."

"Well yes, but—"

Shiro's brow furrowed. "Please, Allura."

She let out a soft sigh, and caved. "Very well. Thank you, Shiro. But don't push yourself too hard, and if you need any assistance don't hesitate to call m—"

He helped her onto her feet, and then let go only when he was sure she was steady. "I appreciate your concern princess, but I'll Coran if a matter that doesn't have to concern you arises. Get some
rest. Everything will be better in the morning."

She thought of their morning coffee routine, and knew he was right. "Alright." Still, she didn't like it. "I'll leave the bridge to you."

She let Coran walk her back to her room, and fell into bed and asleep almost immediately.

In her nightmares, Altea burned.

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"—and you're not shoving hard enough!"

Lance grunted in frustration at the accusation, shoving back against Keith to prove it wrong. It was just his luck to be stuck in an elevator with him of all people, why hadn't he just stayed in the kitchen baking with Hunk and Pidge? He could’ve been having cookies right now. Or should have already been at the pool the castle apparently had. But no, he was here, trapped, and they were barely making any progress towards the vent above them that would bring their freedom, and hopefully, the pool.

He wondered if his predecessor, Sarli, had been as annoyed by their Red Paladin, whomever it was.

"Hey Keith," he spoke up.

Keith sounded like he was ready to cut someone with his knife. "What, Lance?"

"D'you think my paladin was a good person?"

Keith's iciness melted away. "What? Why're you asking that?"

"Well, I mean, they were Galra, weren't they?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Keith cleared his throat, glancing over his shoulder, the towel draped over Lance's brushing his. "Look, Lance, I hate to admit it, but you're a good paladin, and the Blue Lion chose you for a reason. Why does it matter if your previous paladin was Galra or not?"

"I'm just saying, the Black Lion chose Zarkon, and clearly that was a big mistake, so how do we know the rest of us are actually as chosen as Allura thinks we are?"

Keith shifted. "Shiro is."

Lance's face fell. "Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I know that whether a person's good or not does depend on their actions, I just... Zarkon nearly stole the Black Lion, and if some of the old paladins were Galra, then maybe that's how they had Red, or maybe the Galra knows about Earth, maybe Sarli left the Blue Lion there, but—"

"If they do, your family could be in danger?" Keith said slowly.

Lance nodded, ducking his head. "I know it's dumb. We have a lot of other things to worry about."

Keith was silent for so long Lance thought he wasn't going to say anything, and was about to suggest they start pushing again, when Keith said, "It's not dumb. If my dad was still alive, I'd probably feel the same way. But the Galra got close to Earth when they captured Shiro, and they left it alone when it didn't seem worth it, so I don't know why would have changed their minds now. I'm sure your family is fine."
Lance gave him a small, tired smile, even if he knew the other boy couldn't see it. "Thanks, Keith."

"Don't mention it." Keith coughed a tad awkwardly. "Now, are we going to go to the pool, or?"

Lance laughed. "Yeah, right. I have missed being around water. C'mon. We're not far from the vent."

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Shiro turned his head away from his screens when he heard the doors swish open, and recognized Allura's footsteps in an instance, catching a glimpse of the princess in the corner of his eye. He stood, turning around to face her, his brow furrowed. "What are you doing here?" he asked, already fairly certain he know what exactly was on her mind. To be fair, she'd taken longer to give up on sleeping than he'd thought, but that didn't mean she shouldn't give it another try. "You should be resting."

She approached her station, gesturing with her hands. "I cannot sleep. Zarkon is out there. He's searching for us." She drew up a screen as he met her halfway, and caught her hand in his, his palm folded over the back of hers.

"I know how you feel," he said, his gaze softening as he tugged her hand downwards. His thumb ran down the curve between her thumb and index finger, and he didn't let go as she looked back at him, her face open and surprised. "But you have to step away for awhile. It's what's best for everyone."

Allura sighed, slipping her hand out from under his and he felt a strange twinge of disappointment. "There is still so much to do."

"Like what?"

"Searching for Zarkon."

"But beyond that?" he pressed, stepping closer, ignoring the way his face wanted to flush. Why did he feel so warm all of a sudden?

She seemed similarly flustered, the exhaustion likely getting to her, as she stammered, "I, uh… the mice… need…"

His brows knit together, the thought of how adorable she looked crossing his mind before he forcibly pushed it away. "The mice?"

"Yes!" She seemed to seize upon the way out. "The mice need a bath. They haven't had one for ages."

Shiro smiled, amused, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked at her. "A bath?"

"Yes," she said, rather defensively.

"Alright. Where do we start?"

"We?"

"Rest can also be relaxation, and I need to make sure you're relaxing properly, princess," he clarified. "For the good of the team."

Allura blinked at him, and then a smile spread across her face as she decided to play along. "Yes, of course. Well then, come along. I believe the mice are in the library at the moment."
They got a tub full of water from the kitchen, gathered up the mice, some soap and towels, and sent to washing. Shiro rolled up his sleeves, and Allura's battle suit was waterproof, as they set to work. Not that it was anything particularly serious, in fact, it was exactly what Shiro had been hoping for: relaxing and even fun, even if he kept one eye on his screens in case something happened. Allura was even more adorable with the way she'd coo and speak with the mice as they squeaked back at her, and as he dried Platt off, it reminded him of the hamster he'd had when he was twelve, a fond smile moving onto his face.

Perhaps he had needed this, too.

The mice were bundled up in a towel on Allura's lap to dry, as she sat in Shiro's usual chair and he stood beside it, leaning on the back. Her hands were slowed from fatigue, as she typed across the datapad, but at least she wasn't stiff or worried, anymore. Maybe she'd even be able to get some rest.

"Were mice common on Altea?" he asked.

She glanced down at the way Chulatt was sleeping on Platt's big green and yellow stomach, his blue ears bigger than his whole tiny head. "Fairly common, for any household that didn't have cats. I expect these four scurried down in the kitchens all the time, and got lost in the chaos when... when Altea was attacked."

He could practically see her face fall, and regret grew in his chest; he hadn't meant to make her sad. "Princess, I—"

"Coran and I were sent back to Altea."

The words took a few seconds to register, and even once they did, all he could manage was, "What?"

"The wormhole. The witch's magic warped it, and we were sent back in time, to the day before Altea fell. Letting the planet get destroyed was the only way we could hope to have enough energy to come back."

Shiro shifted, and knelt beside her, hesitantly reaching for her hands and grateful when she let him take them. "I am so sorry, Allura," he breathed. "I can't imagine how terrible that must have been for you. But..." Could he really be this selfish? He swallowed hard, and said it anyway. "Thank you for coming back to us."

To me.

She gave his hand a squeeze, her eyes shining as she gave him the smallest, teariest smile possible. "Thank you, Shiro. I'm just glad that you and the other paladins are safe. I was worried that we wouldn't get to you in time, with the wound the witch inflicted on you..."

He returned her smile. "Imagine how I felt about you. When you were captured, I felt like..."

The castle shook as shots fired down at it, and they both looked up in alarm. Allura shot to her feet, rushing to her station and muttering quiznak under her breath as Shiro resumed his, and she barked out, "Paladins, bridge, now!"

The kids and Coran rushed in, Lance and Keith's hair both damp with towels around their shoulders —why were they in swim trunks?—as Lance gasped, "We'll settle who won our splash fight later," as he ran to his station. Soapy water sloshed over the side of the small tub left near the stairs that let up to Allura's station, as Shiro fought to keep his head clear and his orders speedy and concise.
He was just glad Hunk's accident in cooking came through in the end, and they got the scaultrite lenses working enough to wormhole from out of the Galra's grasp. Venturing out into the Lions hadn't worked, and he didn't like feeling the Black Lion slip out from under his fingers whenever Zarkon was around. There had to be a way to break the connection, and strengthen his own. As for how they were being tracked...

Allura had announced her thoughts that it was her, as Haggar had come for them on Arus after the princess had awoken, and while it made sense... *It doesn't matter princess, we're in this together, we're gonna get out together.* He would never leave her again.

He gritted his teeth, even as the joyful paladins exited the bridge, content with their victory. He wished he could have some answers.

But at least, as he approached Allura, and they silently did a more in depth scan of the castle for any tracking devices, fingers brushing as they typed across the screens, he had a tiny shred of peace in the eye of the storm.
In the end, their searches yielded nothing, and Allura gnawed on her bottom lip as worry grew into a heavy pit in her stomach. Shiro's chivalry was admirable, as was almost everything about him, but no matter what he said, it did matter if she was the one being tracked. She suddenly understood all too well the anxiety that must have been consuming him back on Olkarion. How could she live with herself if she was the one always putting them in danger?

She fell silent, even as Shiro kept typing, a frown etching its way onto her face, until she reached for his hand and stilled it. "There's no point in searching any longer. Zarkon is clearly tracking us through me." Shiro dropped his head and frowned at her, and she pressed on, knowing he would be the hardest and most important person to convince. "Would it really be so hard to believe? Zarkon's forces showed up on Arus only after I awoke."

His voice was tight, but patient. "I never said you were wrong, princess. I just said that it doesn't matter, and it doesn't. We're not leaving you, and worm-holing is our best chance to stay free from the Galra until we can figure out a way to undo it."

She frowned. "If I am the one being tracked, I need to know. I can take a pod and see what happens, and radio you and the paladins if I need assistance. At least then we will know if it is me, and can concentrate our resources to remedying it—"

He didn't look away, his frown deepening. "Allura, it doesn't matter if—"

"Yes, it does—"

"And what if something goes wrong? What then—"

"It won't—"

"You don't know that—"

"Shiro—"

"I can't lose you again!" His hands hovered over her upper arm, as though he wanted to hold her, but refrained, his shoulders sagging even as his voice lacked none of its conviction. "I can't lose you
again. And you..." She softened, taking a small step closer, his hands warm when they cupped the bend of her elbows and she fitted her fingers into the crook of his. "You refused to let me leave, when I thought it might've been me. How can I not do the same for you?" He swallowed hard. "How could I not do anything, for you?"

"Shiro, I..." Her throat tightened. How was she supposed to face this and remain resolute?

"Stay. Please."

She didn't meet his eyes, and focused on the black V of his paladin armour instead. "Alright," she breathed. "Thank you." His exhale was soft and warm, ghosting across the furrow of her brow, and she was both relieved and disappointed when he let go of her and stepped away. He seemed to take a moment to compose himself, and his usual professional manner. "Princess, may I ask you something?"

The sudden change took her aback, but she blinked, and then nodded, schooling her expression into a more professional one that matched his own. "Of course, Shiro."

"Did Keith seem... off, to you? Today? Or, uh, since Ulaz..."

She thought back to the paladins after they had taken their most recent wormhole jump. Pidge, Lance, and Hunk were as jovial and joking with each other as they usually were. Clearly, their division from the rest of the team had also done them some good. But Keith's small smiles at their antics, or returned jabs at Lance, hadn't been there like usual either.

"He was rather quiet," she considered. "But he may have just been stressed, I would assume you would be a better judge of his character? You have known him longer."

"You could say that," he said dryly, and her eyebrows rose.

"I just did?"

Shiro sighed, a tad fondly. "Earthling expression, princess. I'll check on him in the morning, and we can all start making a game plan to deal with the Galra. I think it's time we take the fight to them. They've been chasing us from galaxy to galaxy. The last thing they expect is for us to come after them. I can even have Pidge rig up a Galra finder, if she hasn't started on one already."

"It sounds like a wise course of action," she said, giving him a small smile. She reached up to tuck a stray curl of white behind her ear, as she thought back to their brief disagreement on Olkarion. "Shiro, can we promise one another that this is the last fight we have over losing each other?"

He slowly returned her smile, his eyes soft. "We can do our best."

The bridge doors opened and Coran walked in, a spring in his step, even as they sprang apart. "The paladins have all been fed and readied for a good long nap," he reported, "and I think that you two would do well to follow in their footsteps." He gave them an even stare. "Both of you. I'll watch the bridge. No discussion."

Shiro gave him a grateful smile, even as Allura tsked, displeased with being told what to do, but not willing to fight him, either. "Very well. We'll see you in the morning."

Their first night in the castle, the Paladins had been so tired they'd simply gone to whatever rooms were closest (although Lance had picked a fight with Keith, before Shiro had shut it down and
assigned them rooms) in a hallway not far from where Allura's was. The paladin rooms were far plainer, Allura knew, not that she had ever stayed in any of them. They were meant to be guest rooms for short time visitors, and she had taken Shiro to his that first night, even when he had offered to stay up and help many times. It was only later on that Allura realized he likely hadn't gotten any sleep at all regardless, and she and Coran could have benefited from having the extra helping hand. That, and she could have gotten to know him sooner, but... With everything that had happened that day, she supposed Shiro wouldn't have been on her mind.

They walked to the fork in the hallways where their paths diverged, and turned to each other. "Kinda surprised Coran didn't kick us out earlier," Shiro said, and Allura let out a soft giggle despite herself. How was it he always managed to brighten her mood?

"Sometimes he feels like more of a nanny than an advisor," she added, and he chuckled. She smiled sweetly at him. "Goodnight, Shiro."

His eyes crinkled. "Goodnight, princess."

In the morning, they'd get answers, but at least for tonight they were safe, and it was with that content thought that Allura closed her eyes, and fell asleep.

:::

"—it was bad enough when it was just you," Kolivan hissed through gritted teeth, "even if you were never supposed to discover—"

"So you planned on letting me live out my days as everything you were actually fighting against?" Thace said, keeping his voice even.

"If that kept you alive, then yes! And now you've threatened to drag Orilla into this—"

"She was already involved, whether you like it or not, she's the one who saved my life when —" Thace fell silent when Kolivan raised his hand, flat palmed and next to his own cheek, and Thace knew at first his brother thought the warning had worked —there were certain things you just didn't do as a Galra, and typically questioning the chain of command or family hierarchy was one of them —when a cough came from behind, and Thace saw their sister standing over his shoulder.

"Were you going to tell me you planned to excuse me from our newfound family rebellion?"

Kolivan turned, his bulky shoulders blocking Thace's view of his sister, leaving just glimpses of his face. "You're both too young for this."

Thace heard Orilla scoff. "And you're not?"

"Just because I made this choice does not mean you both have too as well."

"We're family," Orilla said pointedly. "That means we don't leave. Ever."

So why did she? The thought had tormented Thace too many times, as he worked his way through the archives, through all the sleepless nights that had led up to this. The new Paladins of Voltron had come from a planet called Terra. Ulaz had known a prisoner called Champion, and the paladins had come to central command. All these important events couldn't have been completely unrelated. It was bad enough they'd lost the base Ulaz had been stationed at, after he hadn't radioed in (or at least, that was how Kolivan had painted it, rather than the life of a young Galra soldier, lost needlessly and— Thace clenched his fists) but now... there had to be someway Orilla was connected. He couldn't have lost his sister too.
Even if no one had heard from her in years. She couldn't be lost to the cosmos. She couldn't. She promised.

The doors opened behind him, and he fought not to appear as startled as he felt, one of Haggar’s druids drifting into the room, robes trailing over the floor and making it look like they were floating. He resisted the urge to shudder. The sentries were cold and metallic, the other Galra around him bloodthirsty and ambitious, but it was the witch's disciples that truly made his stomach turn over with unease.

Thace was just glad he'd managed to delete and encrypt his search history before it was too late. Knowledge or death, he reminded himself, as he left the room as quick as he could. He was set to report to Commander Throk soon anyway; something about a search party for Commander Sendak? The Emperor's prized general had gone missing and he was none too pleased about it, so it would be better for everyone once he was found.

Wouldn't it be just cruel enough to fit, if they found Sendak before he found Orilla? Or worse still, with news of the Galra having come so close to Terra and finding some primitive scientists travelling through the work camp Thace had been stationed to oversee a feeb ago, if the Galra found her son before she did?

:::

Repairs on the castle continued well into the morning, and Coran wasn't surprised when he stumbled upon Number Five, asleep with her data pad in her lap and glasses askew with a code program running and plugged up to the paw of the Green Lion she was resting against. Thora's wife Wyrna had always been the same way, pushing herself further in making astronomical breakthroughs. Thora had shared many stories of Coran about his sister-in-law falling asleep at her work desk, and Thora carrying her to bed.

Seeing his sister again in Altea, and getting to say goodbye (although she didn't know it) hadn't made the sharp sting of losing her a second time ache any less, and he debated for a moment whether he should bother waking Pidge at all. Shiro and Allura had made their plans—oh those two, always conversing about anything but themselves it seemed like—but hadn't woken to put them into practice, yet. It couldn't hurt to get a head start, but at the same time, he knew his team was tired, and they’d have to be on alert when the Galra inevitably came bursting in yet again. What was the harm in letting them sleep for a few more vargas?

He was on his way out of the Green Lion's hangar when his ears twitched, and he heard Pidge yawn and stir behind him, still groggy with sleep. "Coran?"

He wheeled around, giving her a chipper grin. "Yes Number Five?"

"Is it time for breakfast yet?" she mumbled, blinking blearily behind her glasses.

"Almost, although we got some new foods from the Olkari I'm not quite classify as either breakfast or not, a little of nibiru."

"Nibiru?" she repeated, pushing herself up and tucking her datapad under one arm. He knew she'd gone to the training deck to learn Altean the other day, as he'd been the one to turn the switch on from fighting to linguistics (he'd left it halfway at standard protocol). "I didn't get to see that one."

"Oh. It simply means a bit of both, or in between. Something or someone who doesn't belong either here or there, do you see?" Sometimes he wondered if he could fit that definition too. A man who’d been born in the past, watched the future go by, and woke up in the present without realizing a thing.
If he'd ever fit in here, in a galaxy without everyone else he loved, without his family, without his king.

Pidge pushed her glasses up her nose. "Oh. Alteans have a word for that?"

"Alteans have a word for everything." He smiled softly at her. "We were constantly travelling, sleeping and waking at opposite or non-existent night cycles to our own, learning new languages, practicing our rituals and incorporating new ones, changing our bodies. Some Alteans chose to live out their lives as an entirely different alien form they felt suited them best. We welcomed the variations of existence the university could give us."

When her face didn't light up, the way it usually did when hearing him talk—alright, maybe not light up, but she usually looked at least interested (unlike Keith or Lance) rather than contemplative or... troubled? He bent down to her level. "Is everything alright, Pidge?"

She looked up quickly. "Y-yeah. Just... I think that term, nibiru, might fit me pretty well? I mean, I spent a lot of time pretending to be someone I wasn't, but then it became easy, and natural, and now, I can't—or don't?—really want to go back to exactly who I was before then, because that doesn't seem to fit quite right now either, but..."

"You're searching for answers," Coran realized.

She gave him a half smile. "It's weird. I'm used to having them, most of the time."

"Ah. Well, questioning is a very Altean thing for you to do, Pidge."

"What if I never stop?"

"Discovering who you are is one of the great joys of life," Coran said, "and if you're truly wise, or seek knowledge, then it will never really end. Even if you get answers to some things."

Pidge set her datapad aside, and Coran slowly took the seat next to her, as both of them stretched out their legs and she glanced over at him. "Are you searching for something?" she asked.

"I..."

He twisted his mustache. How many times had he asked themselves if he'd been right, back on Altea? The first time. Agreeing to help Alfor hide the Lions, not stopping him from putting Allura in the cryopod. The second time. Telling Allura there was no other way to get back home, if he'd been right, if he'd been wrong. If he'd doomed his sister to die or if he never would have made a difference, anyway.

"I suppose..." his throat tightened. "I suppose I'm looking for the one thing I can never find. Absolution."

"Huh." Pidge mulled over his words. When she was quiet, he knew she was always thinking hard about something. "I guess on earth, we'd call that God. Or destiny. Neither of which I believe in, but..." she shrugged. "As mad as I am that my family and Shiro were taken, if they hadn't, we'd never have known about the Galra, and we would have been sitting ducks back on Earth, completely caught unawares when they did come and completely unprepared."

"'Sitting ducks'?"

"Something Lance says. But either way, if everything had gone right back on Earth, things really would have been hopeless, in the end. At least this way, we have a chance. We can make a
difference. And, we have hope. So I guess I do believe that maybe... all this happened for a reason. I
know it's probably not the exact answer you were looking for, I mean, it is still just guess work at the
end of the day, but—"

Coran hugged her. "Thank you Pidge."

She hesitated, and then hugged him back, ignoring the way his mustache tickled her cheek. It
reminded her of the mustache her own father had had one year, when she was five. "You're
welcome, Coran."

He pulled away, and then patted her on the head, winking. "And if you feel like nibiru fits you, I
have some books that might help, now that you can read Altean."

She brightened. "Yeah. That'd be great. And, Coran?"

"Yes, Number Five?"

"Don't tell the others yet, but... would you use they and them pronouns for me, when it's just us? So I
can practice hearing them?"

Coran smiled at them. "I would be happy to, Number Five."

:::

The rest of the team had amalgamated on the bridge, it being clear this was one of the mornings
breakfast would be a 'get your own' type of situation. They did their best to have a solid routine and
meal times, but it wasn't uncommon for there to be days they were too tired to cook for anyone but
themselves, or a team member would miss a meal and eat later (having gotten distracted by their own
tasks). Still, it was understood that by the time the team made it to the bridge in the mornings, it was
expected for everyone to be there unless leeway had been given beforehand, so when Keith wasn't in
his seat or walking in with the others, Shiro took notice.

"Where's Keith? " He asked, moving to his station. Everyone else, including Coran and Allura, were
already at their stations. It wasn't like Keith to be late.

Coran did a quick scan of the castle and its video feeds. "It appears that one of the pods launched in
the middle of the night."

"What?" Lance exclaimed. "Why?"

Shiro gritted his teeth. He'd known something had been bothering the kid. "I dunno," he said, "but
we're about to find out. Coran, contact that pod."

No hologram or screen was available, but Shiro did hear faint static as the commlink crackled to life,
and Coran said, "Keith, where are you?"

"Exactly where I should be: far away from the Castle."

"What?" Shiro struggled to maintain his temper, only slightly softened by the relief that Keith was
alright and alive enough to answer. He thought Keith had gotten over stunts like this a long time ago.
"Why?" he demanded, evenly.

"I think Zarkon might be tracking me, and if he is, this is how I can find out."

"Why would Zarkon be tracking you?" came Allura's voice, heavy with disbelief.
Keith paused. "I dunno. I think he may have imprinted on me when I fought him, or something—"

"The Galra do not im imprint," Allura said stonily, and Shiro sensed an argument between them, and stepped in. Besides for Keith and Lance, they were the pair that fought the most (even if the boys won by a very large margin).

"Keith, splitting up the team makes us far more vulnerable," he tried. It was a lesson he'd tried to teach him time and time again back on earth, but he'd thought once they'd came to space—when their survival literally depended on it—it would stick, but apparently not. He made his voice more stern. "Come back to the castle immediately."

Keith's voice was just as set, as he replied, "No," before turning his communications channel on mute, the soft sound signalling it echoing across their side of it, for a moment.

Coran typed across his holopad, and reported, "His pod is moving in the opposite direction. It appears he took the one Pidge modified, and the booster is working just fine."

Shiro muttered *quisnak* under his breath. "Pidge, you hacked that thing. Can you hack it again? Get access to his screens and see if he has an actual destination in mind?"

The green paladin stuck out her tongue, and started typing. "I can try, but it's pretty far out of range. It might take some time." "It seems it—oh no."

"What?" said Hunk nervously, poking his index fingers together.

"It seems he downloaded the coordinates from the hard drive Ulaz gave Shiro. He's heading to the base of the Blade of Mamora."

"We have to get him back!" said Lance.

Shiro was about to give the order to do just that—oh, Keith was going to be in for the scolding of a lifetime once he was back (could you ground someone in space?)—when a red symbol and alarm flashed across the castle's main screen. A standard distress warning. "Coran," he said, "where's it coming from?"

Coran typed furiously for a few seconds, and then a yellow planet on the cusp of crumbling overtook the red alarm. Hazy dark yellow clouds were laid over a putrid outer shell of a landscape, with over view shots of five main pillars elevating plateaus in the air above the smog.

"A dwarf planet called Taujeer. Most of the planet is made up of poisonous gases, and the Taujeerians live on the five plateaus, which are elevated and overlooking ten million squared feet, to be able to breathe and flourish. There's not much here beyond that, I'm afraid."

"But the Galra," Allura cut in. "They're there?"

"They must be," Coran considered, "or in some kind of danger, otherwise they wouldn't send the distress code."

"And a paladin of Voltron must answer every call for aid," Shiro said, trying not to sound too bitter, and as he looked back at Allura he already knew she knew what was on his mind. They'd save the Taujeerians and then go after Keith. "Allura, can you cut down our travel time and wormhole us a bit closer?"

Her voice wasn't as sharp as he would have expected—annoyance, at Keith perhaps—and instead far softer, far more sympathetic, as she said, "Of course, Shiro," and he knew they would handle
whatever the repercussions of Keith running away were, together.

"Alright," he said, raising his voice and speaking to his team. "Let's get in there, see what's up, and get out once it's solved. We have a Red Paladin to track down."

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It seemed a simple solution was never in order. Shiro had broadcasted his quick meeting with the Taujeerian leader, Baujal, back to her, and it had led to little more than a shut down of the one option they had initially thought of. "Why can't we place the Ark-ship on the strongest pillar while we carry out the evacuation?" he'd asked.

"No pillar is stronger than the other," Baujal had explained. "All five are necessary for survival, for a thriving society. The Galra knew if they broke one we would be finished. We need you to restore the pillar they broke. Only that will buy us enough time to evacuate before the damage they've done to our planet."

Allura fought the urge to pace across the platform of her station, as she watched the four Lions fly to the damaged pillar while Coran directed the Castleship down towards the evacuees. The hazardous gases presented a danger, and the overwhelming heat felt even through the castle walls could have been tempered by the Red Lion, but of course, Keith wasn't here right now.

She gritted her teeth. Of all the irresponsible things and baseless excuses... the Galra did not imprint, and why would Keith believe that regardless? Had it really just been a ruse to run off to the Blade? And in a pod no less; why not take his Lion? She'd known he'd been eager after Ulaz's death, but surely she and Shiro had made him understand why they had to wait. Even if she'd nursed reasons they shouldn't go at all close to her chest, she hadn't told Shiro. Coran had understood, shared in her skepticism, but...

It felt like every time they made some real progress—saving the Balmera and then losing her father's A.I., her keeping Shiro safe only for him to be stupid and reckless and risk everything and—she clenched her fists and the ship nearly shuddered alongside her, until she steadied her raging mind. Why did they always have to take two steps back?

She forced herself to focus back on the task at hand. "Coran, are we cleared for landing?"

"At your signal, princess."

"Mega thrusters ago. Let's get as many Taujeerians on the ark as soon as we can." She fingers flicked up to her earring—did she check in with Shiro so soon, to see how the ground work was going?—but resisted from connecting her commlink to the team's. If there was an issue, he'd tell her. She could trust him with this. He was always the one who figured things out, even when she was falling apart.

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"Nice work Hunk," Shiro praised, clapping the Yellow Paladin heartily on the shoulder as they strode back inside the Castleship. Without the Yellow Lion's latest upgrade of a heavy shoulder canon, it'd been instrumental in allowing the broken pillar to be restored with some of the Taujeerian's own technology.

Hunk pulled off his helmet and tucked it under his arm, giving his leader a sheepish smile. "Yellow did all the work, but thanks."

"Still, it was a big moment, and we couldn't have saved the Taujeerians without you." Shiro smiled
at him. "Thanks for having our backs in there."

"And now we can go save Keith's sorry a—" Pidge grumbled, as they entered the bridge.

"It would be in our best interests to wormhole as closely as possible to Keith's current location," Allura said, as they all flopped down in their seats. Shiro stayed next to her, pulling up a screen to show him. "I've had Coran keep a tracker on him all the while." She glanced at Shiro's face, now void of a smile and a creased brow. Her lips thinned. "We're going to get your brother back."

"I know."

Shiro just worried he wouldn't be the same.

::::

The base didn't look like a base. Keith had let the pod drift over here, thanking the stars or whatever was out there that Pidge's booster rocket had worked, ever since the team had hacked his communications to let him know he wasn't being tracked. For Shiro to ask him to come home. But couldn't his cousin understand? He was going home. Here, he could get answers about his mother. A grandparent. Anything. Answers to all the questions he had back on Earth.

But nothing on Earth, or in the Garrison when he'd actually attended class, could have prepared him for this. He'd thought Ulaz's base had been impressive, with its cloaking and a natural dense defensive system. But this... the blue sphere was constantly whirling, light bending and fractured between two black holes. A pocket of space time. No wonder the Blades had outlasted the Galra for this long, with technology like this. If Pidge was here, he knew what the green paladin would be asking. *Who had developed this tech*, glasses shining with exciting. And then Shiro or Allura, or maybe even Hunk's more worried tone, in the back of his head. *What would happen if this fell into the wrong hands?*

And now that he knew Zarkon and the Galra weren't tracking him, he could get some answers, and make sure that never happened.

Zarkon had said he fought like a Galra soldier, so he would, as he let the ship approach the base. He'd get hailed soon enough. His blade seemed to hum at his hip, strapped to his holster. He didn't want victory. He needed answers.

Knowledge, or death.

Chapter End Notes

note: keith's mother in this fic, orilla, has a different name because i chose it before s5 came out, and as the two characters are going to be very different (personality, motivation wise, etc.) i think it suits them to remain separate. that is all.
"Coran, How soon will we get to the Blade of Marmora's base?" Shiro asked. He was standing at his chair, glad the space was too small to be tempted to pace. Of all the stupid things Keith had done, this had to be in the top three.

"Based on the coordinates that Ulaz gave us, we should be there within a few doboshes," Coran reported.

"I can't wait to see it!" said Pidge. "I mean, they were able to fold space-time, and that was just at an outpost!"

"Coran," said Lance, leaning over the Altean's shoulder, having abandoned due to anxiousness, "where's the base located?"

Coran pointed across the charts with his index finger. "In between those three deadly celestial objects.

"The perfect defensive position," Pidge noted.

Allura didn't sound impressed. "Or the perfect trap."

"Yeah, I'm with Allura," said Hunk, sitting at his chair. "Maybe we should, uh, proceed cautiously?"

"We can certainly do a better job than Keith did," Lance muttered, and Shiro sighed.

"We don't even know if Keith has reached the Blade of Marmora yet," Shiro pointed out, "given that he was in a pod and it likely wasn't as able to travel as quickly as the castle, even with Pidge's modifications. The best thing we can do is see if he's there, and collect some intel before we have to go get him. The Blade may even freely hand him back over, as he has nothing that would be of real use to them and his Lion is here, but we should also be prepared for a fight. They've been fighting against Zarkon for thousands of years and still haven't won; we should expect some desperation at
The desperation of a futile fight was one Shiro had known quite well, a hollow ache in the arena.

"Open a hailing frequency," he commanded to Coran, after clearing his throat. A black background popped up on screen, including a purple and flatlining voice frequency recorder. "We are the Paladins of Voltron, sent here by Ulaz of the Blade of Marmora. Is the Red Paladin here?"

The purple line rose in waves alongside the female voice that echoed. "The Red Paladin has been taken into custody. No more than two other paladins may enter. Come unarmed."

"Custody?" Hunk puzzled. "So, Keith's a prisoner?"

"I don't know," Allura said. "But it wouldn't surprise me if the Blade are very wary of outsiders, given how they've seemingly survived all this time." She glanced at her co-leader, wishing she could see his face and gauge what was going through his head, hoping he'd look back at her. When he didn't, she continued, "Why would they insist we come unarmed? Shiro, this doesn't feel right."

"We don't have any other choices," said Shiro. "We're here and we know they have Keith. The Red Lion hasn't acted up, so he may not be in danger, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't go after him. Besides, they don't know I can use my arm as a weapon."

"They just sent us a route to the base," Coran notified them, "but we'll have to move quickly. Because of the solar flares, it's only open for another varga. Then, it will be closed for another sixteen. However, the course to the base will be quite treacherous, to say the least. You'll be walking a razor's edge between the gravitational pull of the black holes and the sun. One false move, and you'll either be crushed into infinity or burnt to a crisp."

They needed to make sure they had the right Lion for the job then, Shiro knew. The Red Lion was the obvious one, but out of commission with Keith gone (oh, he was gonna ground that kid for life) and while Yellow could have withstood the heat, it was too slow. Blue and Green were small and fast enough, but didn't have the protection to last in such an intense environment. He knew Black could do it, and knew he was a talented enough pilot for it too. It was the simplest solution, and he was glad when no one contested it.

"Then we need to get the Black Lion ready to take the journey," Shiro said decidedly, as he stood up and the whole team drifted closer to the centre of the bridge alongside him.

"So," Lance said, puffing out his chest. Shiro wasn't surprised he wanted to be the one to help save Keith; god knows he'd lord it over the other boy for as long as possible. "Any thoughts on who's gonna join you on this little mission?"

"I appreciate the offer," Shiro said curtly, "but I'll be going alone. That way we can minimize the risk."

Allura gave him a stern look. "Absolutely not."

He looked at her in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Keith is already in custody, and you'll be bringing a Lion to them. We don't know how many Blade of Marmora there are at that base, and you cannot possibly fight them all." She raised her chin. "It's too dangerous. I'm going with you."

Shiro searched her face. Was she thinking of the last time they'd gone to a Galra base together? Did she think he couldn't handle it on his own? How much of the hardness in her eyes was backed by
logic, and how much by emotion, and how much did he want each one to be? He shook himself straight. "No," he said shortly. If she could use logic to back her arguments, then so could he. "We need you here. If Zarkon shows up, he won't know I'm at the base, but he will see the Castleship. You should hang back so he doesn't immediately see the base, and if you need to wormhole away, you can. Whoever's back at the castle will be a sitting duck without you."

The princess scowled, crossing her arms over her chest. "This is no time for your strange earthling metaphors, Shiro. My point still stands that it is too dangerous for you to go alone, so if you will not let me accompany you, then at least let me pick who will."

Shiro raised his eyebrows. "Who is?"

Lance sidled up to her. "I'm flattered, princess. I mean, admittedly, I was thinking things might get a little hot, so you're gonna want someone who can stay cool, like—"

"Hunk," she said crisply.

Hunk said, "Me?" at the same time Lance said, "Hunk?" and quickly quieted, even if Shiro immediately knew why she had chosen the Yellow Paladin.

"You've been a well ordained diplomat to at least two alien peoples, both in dire situations. You're also well equipped for rescue missions, having successfully rescued me from Zarkon's central command and helping me fend off Haggar. You're also typically nonthreatening, while remaining a talented fighter," Allura rattled off simply.

Hunk's eyes darted nervously to where the base lay. "Are you sure? I mean, it is a base full of probably hostile Galra... we'll need Pidge here as a hacker to their systems, so maybe Lance should go instead."

Lance looked rather put out, pouting for a moment, before he seemed to force a grin and he clapped his friend on the back. "Nah, of course it should be you buddy!" he said jovially. "You'll knock it out of the park and get Keith home safe and sound, no problem. I'll stay here and keep the rest of us safe in the meantime."

Shiro tried not to let his irritation bleed through—he had wanted to leave five minutes ago, not argue—and swallowed it back, smiling and placing a hand on Hunk's shoulder. "I would be honoured if you'd accompany me. You got Shay, Allura, and myself out of Galra clutches, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Hunk brightened a bit. "I guess so. Alright, let's get this over with."

They moved to the door, when Allura said, "Be safe," and Shiro glanced back at her, their eyes meeting.

But because he couldn't promise I will, all he said was, "You too."

:::

Keith sprang to his feet from inside his holding cell, when the outer doors to the hallway he was trapped in swooshed open with a low scraping sound. After hailing the Blade from the pod, he'd shown them his knife and they'd used a tractor beam to pull him into the base. He'd thought he'd get answers, or at least a decent welcome, but one named Antok had forced him to the ground and taken his blade immediately upon his entry, and another member named Regris (Keith couldn't be sure; their glowing purple masks and bulky shoulder padded uniforms made it hard to tell them apart) had taken him here.
He couldn't believe he'd left the team and let Shiro down for this. And now he was probably going to be tortured, or used as bait. Why had he ever thought that some Galra could be good, anyway? Or maybe he had just hoped it, hoped that he wouldn't be the exception, if he turned out to be Galra after all.

He recognized the first Blade striding towards—the Galra still had scuffs on his knuckles from slamming Keith against the ground—but not the second, who was wearing a different uniform. Was of a different ranking, judging by the way Antok let him lead the way?

"Are you finally going to listen to me?" Keith said sharply, and the unknown Galra exchanged a look with Antok, as though to say, *Are you serious?*

Antok faced no such fazing. "The blade you brought with you. Who did you steal it from?"

"I didn't," Keith ground out. "I've had it all my life."

"Lies," said the second Galra, and his mask dissolved to reveal a pale purple face with red markings and fluffy ears. "If you had come here merely as a Paladin of Voltron, that would be bad enough, but to come here with the sacred blade of one of our fallen, and then to besmirch its name?"

"I didn't steal it. I've had it as long as I can remember. Somehow, one of your knives ended up with me on planet Earth. I didn't even know there were others like it until I saw Ulaz with one. You know who this blade belonged to. Tell me how it would have gotten to Earth. I have to know."

"Our organization is built on secrecy and trust, neither of which you have or deserve—much less knowledge of the identity of who owned the blade before you."

"Where did it come from?" Keith tried again. His father had hardly ever spoken of his mother. There were no pictures of her. Shiro, who had been seven when Keith was born, had never mentioned anything either. And Keith hadn't thought anything too strange of it, until now. And now, he wouldn't—he couldn't back down. "I have to know."

The second Galra studied him, as though it wasn't the answer he was expecting. "You seek knowledge? There is only one way to attain knowledge here."

"How? I'll do it!"

Antok now looked at the second Galra in surprise. "Kolivan, you can't possibly—"

But Kolivan raised his hand wordlessly, flat palmed, and Antok went silent. "The trials of Marmora. Should you survive, you may keep the blade and its secrets will be revealed."

Trials. The childish part of his brain thought of the simulation tests at the Garrison, easy to ace and the only thing keeping him around, beyond Shiro. What would happen to his team if he died. But Keith shrugged off the guilt. They'd find a new paladin if they needed to. Probably be better off without him; Shiro wouldn't have to worry anymore.

And besides, he didn't plan on dying today, and set his shoulders.

"I'll do it."

::::

To his credit, although he was nervous, Hunk did stay quiet as Shiro navigated them in the Black Lion through the asteroid field and Blade protective barriers. The blue sphere, hazy and swirling, that
most of the base hid behind was constantly moving, and Shiro wondered how they could have built a structure to withstand such an ever constant force.

"Hunk," he said, and the teen snapped to attention, "do you think once we're inside the base, you could possibly reverse engineer it?"

"Um, maybe?" Hunk fidgeted by pressing his index fingers together. "My mom was always great at stuff like that, but it was never my specialty—why d'you need to know how the base works?"

Shiro's jaw tightened, but his voice remained calm. "So that if we need to, we can bring the thing down. If that's what it takes to get Keith and the two of us out of here alive."

Hunk's headband rose along with his eyebrows. "You're worried too?"

"Of course I'm worried. He's my little brother... and you're my friend. I want to make sure both of you get back as safe as possible." Shiro sighed, and then perked up as he glanced back at him. "After all, how else am I supposed to ground Keith for life?"

Hunk gave him a small smile, but it quickly faded when he pointed ahead. "Look."

The base looked almost too solitary yet fragile to be a spaceship that could withstand being suspended in gravity and time. It was made of a deep purple rock, with metal functions fastening and holding the whole thing together and attached to booster rockets and other jutting facilities, but overall it was a distinct and recognizable replication of the emblem on Ulaz's blade: a crooked and jagged flipped number five.

Hunk's eyes widened. "I don't think I can reverse engineer that," he said, shocked into a spellbound softness, and Shiro could only gulp and nod in acknowledgement, before he guided the Black Lion forward anyway.

They swerved to avoid the last line of defences, and Shiro was glad when the cracks showing a hangar door glowed purple enough to be visible through the swirling blue storm clouds and electricity surrounding the base. The hangar opened, and he landed the Lion neatly. Now came the actual hard part. He wished Keith hadn't run off and the Blade didn't have an automatic bargaining chip. He wished he could take a moment to steel himself and take a deep breath, but couldn't without scaring Hunk. He wished he could comm Allura and make sure that her, the castle, and everyone was safe. He wished, as selfish was it was, that he'd let himself be foolish and let her come along with him.

Instead, he got none of those things, closed his eyes for only a moment because it was all he could do, and stepped out of the Lion's lowered maw with Hunk in tow. Two Galra were waiting for them a respectable amount of distance away. The smaller one in the sleeker uniform and a tail wore a mask like the one Ulaz had, but the other one was bare faced and stoic.

"I am Kolivan," he said sternly, by way of introduction. "Leader of the Blade of Marmora."

Shiro had no such title. Calling himself the Black Paladin was his usual moniker—he was the leader of Voltron, maybe, but not in charge of it the way Allura was—but even that didn't feel quite right. He still couldn't quite shake the feeling of the Black Lion being torn from his fingers by Zarkon. Who knew what would happen when they met again? And being surrounded by Galran luminescent lights wasn't helping either.

"My name is Shiro," he said simply, "and this is Hunk. We are Paladins of Voltron."

Kolivan stayed unimpressed. "I know who you are."
"Then you know we were sent by one of your own, and are here to retrieve one of our own."

Kolivan's eyes hardened. "Ulaz was a fool to divulge this location to you. He had a penchant for ignoring orders and following his impulses. That's what got him killed. Your Red Paladin seems to have a similar problem."

Shiro's anger turned white hot, burning his throat. "He gave his life to save us! What he did brought us here today, and Voltron is ready to assist you once we get our teammate back. Are we welcome here or not?"

"You have nerve for coming here claiming to be allies, when your Red Paladin stole one of our blades, and you have allied yourself with the Princess of Altea."

Shiro took a step forward, gritting his teeth. "And what problem do you have exactly, with Princess Allura?"

"If you do not have one, then clearly you do not know what her family has been responsible for since Voltron's conception, and it is not worth telling you."

"Uh, Mr Kolivan, sir," said Hunk uneasily, "not that this isn't all great and your base isn't..." He glanced around at the somber grey walls and purple lights. "Lovely, but where is Keith, our Red Paladin, right now?"

Kolivan turned his golden eyes slowly onto Hunk. "He is undergoing the Trials as we speak."

"Trials? Like, legal stuff?"

Kolivan looked doubly unimpressed, and Hunk shrank back. "He claims the blade he carries is his. The only way to know for certain is to see if he survives the Trials of Marmora."

"Well call them off," Shiro said tersely. "He's coming home with us."

"That is not how the Trials of Marmora work. All we can do is watch." Kolivan scowled. "I suppose you want to be taken to him?"

"Yes," said Shiro evenly. "We do."

"Follow me, then."
Chapter Summary

shit hits the fan. that's all, basically. plus, some family drama

ARC II: The Traitor

CHAPTER TEN: Knowledge or Death, Part II

:::

"How goes the Trials?"

Regris turned towards his leader, as Kolivan stepped onto the observation deck, followed by the Black and Yellow Paladins, with Antok bringing up the rear. Even with his comrade's mask on, he could only imagine the scowling expression on the latter's face. He was always uneasy when it came to putting newbies through the Trials, whether he thought they'd live or not. He didn't trust outsiders. And after what had happened with Orilla Maala, Antok couldn't blame him.

"The boy has yet to figure out that if he kills one android, it makes two appear," Regris said dryly, turning his gaze back to the window that showed the deck they'd set aside for the Trials down below.

The Black Paladin looked down, frowning, as the boy hurled the knife into the chest of one android, and panels in the walls on either side of him opened up to allow two more into the arena. Six already lay dead at his feet. "How long does this go on for?"

"As long as it takes for him to see the pattern, and figure out how to change it," said Kolivan, from his place beside Antok, with Regris on the end.

The Black Paladin gave him a sharp look. "And if he doesn't?"

"Knowledge or death, Shiro."

"That's insane," he muttered.

"That," said Antok, "is war. Judging by your story, I would have thought you would be more well acquainted with it."

"What do you mean, my story?"

"You are the one they called Champion in the arenas, are you not?" said Kolivan. "The one Ulaz foolishly freed on a child's hope."

Shiro glared at him. "He—"

"Did you ever think of what mission he sacrificed to do so? Of who he was actually sent to free? And yet he threw away his intel and the mission I tasked him with to free you, for a weapon that paved the way for the ten thousand years of suffering we find ourselves on the tail end of now. You should not be standing here, Takashi Shirogane."

Kolivan jerked his head towards the window,
where the boy still fought on. "And neither should he."

"He'll never quit," Shiro said.

"Then it is up to him to decide whether will be his greatest strength, or his downfall." Kolivan gave him a hard stare. "But regardless, you are only a witness to the Trials. The moment they begin, the participant is on their own. That is the Marmora way. We stand alone against the empire."

"Maybe you don't have to be alone," the Yellow Paladin suggested, raising his hand seemingly for approval of some sort, and Shiro appeared to internally want to facepalm. "I mean, you're all working together, so you're not alone-alone, are you? And now with Voltron, you can have more allies, and—"

Regris scoffed, but Kolivan answered, his voice clipped.

"Every individual Blade member has made the choice to lay their lives down for the cause. It is a choice we do not force. One we do not even encourage. Our members do not marry. They do not have children. They live their life solely for the cause. Anything less is dangerous. We live our lives alone, to be prepared for dying alone. Allies you may be, you still have yet to prove. But tell me: have the Paladins of Voltron come to make the same sacrifice? Because if not, you might as well leave now."

"That doesn't change the fact that it's been ten thousand years and you've barely made a dent in the empire," Hunk pressed. "It's been ten thousand years. This 'we work alone' thing hasn't worked. Maybe try switching it up a bit?" He quieted under Kolivan's fierce glare, but Shiro shot the paladin a quick smile.

"Nice try, Hunk." The smile didn't reach his grey eyes however, and went back to worriedly watching the boy.

Regris found no such concern. He'd seen people die in the Trials, and seen them succeed. He'd lost more friends and comrades than he could keep track of. Probably more than he even knew, at this very moment, who had already died; who would never report back at their scheduled check in point. And when he glanced at Antok, he knew he felt the same. Almost as well as Kolivan did.

Knowledge, or death.

:::

Alright. This wasn't working.

Keith rolled to doge the blow of the nearest android, faceless and purple, and fearsome just like the one that had gone rogue on him when the Castleship's crystal had been corrupted. Except this time there was no air lock to get him out of a sticky situation, no Lance to rescue, no paladins to go to. Just him and his blade and his grit, and the hollow sentries at his feet. Keith drove his knife into the nearest one as it reared its gun at him, ducking the blow of another's sword as the doors on either side of the arena opened and two more dropped in. Dammit. There had to be a better way to do this, before he was completely surrounded.

Okay. Killing one only brought two more. So if he couldn't kill them, he'd have to shut them down. He cursed under his breath. Tech stuff was Pidge and Hunk's specialty, not his. Still, there had to be a control panel around here, or something. Or an exit? But there were no other doors other than the panels more than halfway up the wall, far beyond reach.

No other doors...
It was like someone had turned the ignition key in his brain. If he could maneuver a hover bike back on Earth and survive a jump off a cliff, he could handle this. Keith swung himself under the arm of the nearest bot, threw his blade into another's chest and wrenched it out, shoved the next one to come at him, and started leading them into a line. He wove in and out, their motions fluid but still constrained by jerky, metallic joints, as he kicked and stabbed them down, until he shoved one into a collection of others and launched himself into the air as the panels above him opened to drop down more.

His blade pinned their foot and he hoisted himself up, the heavy robot lying on top of him. He shoved it upwards, his blade embedded in its chest, to keep the door from closing, and wiggled the rest of his body into the flat, cold shaft. His feet slipped inside at the last minute before the door clanged close, cleaving the helpless android in half.

Keith pressed his forehead to the cold metal shaft he was lying on, his chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath. The purple suit the Blades had given him to wear for the Trials stick to his skin, as he slowly hauled himself onto his knees, his knife cleft in one hand, and began to crawl. There had to be another exit, to another landing. A new challenge.

One Trial down, two to go.

:::

Allura was getting tired of looking at the endless swirling blue of the base. It shifted every few seconds from beyond the planet the Castleship had tucked itself behind a small wormhole away, and it would have made her dizzy if her gaze and stance weren't so steady; you couldn't steer a giant castleship standing up without a hell of a good balance. Still, it was infuriating seeing the base changing, and hearing nothing along their communications channel. No word from Shiro, or the Blade, or otherwise. What was going on down there? It seemed agonizing to have to wait another twelve vargas.

Vaguely, she could hear Pidge typing behind her and Coran in front, and Lance had moved from his chair to walk around the deck and stretch his legs. Shiro's chair remained empty, and she felt a rush of anger when she caught a glimpse of Keith's chair in the corner of her eye. How dare he run off like this, and put them all at risk.

"We cannot just wait here," she burst finally, drawing up her holoscreens. There had to be something she could do.

"The path is still closed," came Coran's voice, as he turned around to look at her.

"I have to know what's going on down there. Who knows how long Keith has already been there, and what the Blade has been doing to all of them."

"If they were in danger, their Lions would act up," Lance pointed out. "But Yellow and Red are still here."

"I... The Lions did not come to help any of us at Zarkon's central command, and we were far closer then. The Black Lion even ejected Shiro when he needed her the most. If certain things can override a Lion's connection to their paladin, then who's to say that the Marmora's base isn't doing something?" Allura cleared her throat. "Besides, in the past, the Paladins and their Lions were hardly ever far from one another. As only one person could pilot a Lion at a time, it didn't make sense to have them be separated. Perhaps this distance, with all of the other extenuating circumstances, are simply too much."
"Even if we wanted to, there's no way to get a read on their base," Pidge said, slumping over in her seat. "Too much interference from the solar flares and the black holes."

Lance snapped his fingers. "Wait, hadn't Hunk said something about gravitational lensing being an issue? We had a paper on it at the Garrison. I mostly copied from his."

"And then we can reduce the noise," Coran continued excitedly, "and interference and connect with the Red Lion's sensors." He glanced over at Pidge. "Isn't that right, Number Five?"

Pidge shrugged. "It's worth a shot."

Allura looked back at Shiro's empty chair. "Do it."

"There's just one small catch," Coran said. "In order to do so we have to re-route power and manually turn on off our gravitational lensing to keep it from jamming our systems too. The controls are down near the minor mainframe, and since Pidge and I will be here getting things set up, it looks like it's up to you and Lance. He knows some of Hunk's technical knowledge, don't he?"

"I, uh," Lance scratched the back of his neck. "I guess?"

"Excellent. Princess, I trust you two are up to the job?"

Allura's jaw tightened. "Of course, Coran. Come along, Lance. Let's get this done as quickly as possible."

The minor mainframe was located a level below the main power crystal of the castle, and Lance had to jog to keep up with her. Finding the plugs and small crystals for the gravitational lensing was easy enough, once she ripped off the metal panel barring them from the three crystals they had to remove, and the four plugs they had to take out and then put back in. She got the crystals out, and Lance did the plugs.

*Gravitational Lensing, powering down: 1% → 4%*

"Looks like we're going to be here for a while," Lance remarked, and her patience snapped.

"Lance, I swear to the Ancients if you flirt with me right now I will throw you to a howling snargleviper—"

"Whoa, hey!" He held up his hands. "I'm not flirting, just making an observation. What's got your circlet in a twist? I mean, I know it sucks that Keith ran off, and we're all worried about him, but Hunk's great in a sticky situation, and Shiro's not going to let anything happen to either of them, and..." He watched her swallow hard. "It's not Keith or Hunk that you're worried about, is it?"

"Shiro was already Zarkon's prisoner once, and then nearly captured alongside me in the transport ship. Haggar would have taken him if Hunk and I hadn't gotten there in time. And then, with him trusting the Galra when they still may be using him, with Zarkon being able to connect to the Black Lion, I—it's not that I doubt him, I don't—I never have. But I cannot help that worry that this time, I may not be there to protect him."

Lance gave her a small smile. "Princess, can I tell you something?"

She blinked. "Er, of course, Lance?"

"You don't know much about Shiro's life back on Earth, do you?"
"I... know some things." Shiro's father died when he was three. His mother and grandmother raised him. Keith was his cousin. He'd always loved space and had dreamt of the stars ever since he was a child. He had a hamster, a small furry Earthling animal like the mice, when he was twelve. "Why?"

"Back on Earth, Shiro was my hero, the best astronaut out there. Heck, he still is. But that doesn't mean he's infallible, and that doesn't mean he needs to be, right? I mean, yeah, Shiro's gone through a lot, and he's been knocked down a ton, but he always gets up, right?"

"I—yes, I suppose he does."

"Then I think he'll be fine, no matter how the Blade or the Galra try to knock him down. Besides, even if something did happen, all we'd have to do is make him think you're in danger, and he'll give it his 110%." Lance's smile grew. "It's okay to be worried about him. He was worried about you too. But at least right now he has Hunk and Keith to help him fight, and Ulaz was a pretty good guy, so the rest of the Blade probably is too, right?"

Allura held Lance's gaze for a moment, and then sighed, and slowly smiled. "Thank you, Lance. Speaking with you has actually made me feel better."

He grinned at her. "You're welcome, princess." They glanced at the screen, which still had 50% of the way to go, before took a step towards her. "So, about that flirting thing, is it okay in other situations or—"

"No," she said flatly.


::::

Keith grit his teeth as he finally caught a ray of light across the shaft's floor, the grate that would get him out of here somewhere up ahead. All of a sudden he was ten years old again crawling under the porch with sand at his belly instead of cool metal through his skin tight suit, his father coaching him through, his father's kind eyes and the sun greeting him on the other side. But there would be nothing but more hardship ahead, he knew. He twisted around uncomfortably to place his feet first, wiggling down and then slamming his feet onto the grate. It groaned, but didn't break.

Eleven years old, his father pounding on the door, smoke rising outside his window; he'd locked his door after their fight and now it was jammed. It was getting harder to breathe.

Keith kicked against the grate the second time. Eight years old at the first and only ocean he'd ever see, his dad carrying him on broad, fireman shoulders to avoid getting a mouthful of sea water. A third, as he willed the memories away. Why was he thinking of them at a time like this, anyway?

"Come on, come on—"

The grate gave way, and Keith had never been afraid of falling. The first time he'd crashed his hoverbike after trying to go off the cliff. From his bunk at the garrison, before he'd gotten good at sneaking out of his room silently. From the tree in front of his house where faded initials were carved into the bark. The only remnant of his mother besides his blade.

His blade. Keith hit the ground rolling, and straightened up, clutching the hilt in his hand. He didn't know what this new Trial would be, but he hoped it wouldn't take as long for him to figure out as the last one had, as his brain caught up his surroundings. A maze like the one back from the castle's simulator rose up around him, only real and made of stone, the walls a good triple his height.
Climbing had worked well last time. If he could get on top of the maze walls, he could see the more general outline, find the next exit that way. Keith wedged his blade into the closest panel, forcing it open enough, and then hoisted himself up, feet scrabbling at the wall until he managed to lift one leg and fit his foot onto the knife handle as a foothold. He jumped once he had both feet on it, his balance wobbling, and he jumped, his fingertips grazing the top of the maze. Just a little further, and he could enact the rest of his plan.

The maze suddenly tilted on its axis, the edge of the wall he was holding onto turning onto spikes, and he let go with a yelp, stumbling backwards into the opposite wall. The maze slowly righted itself, the spikes closing in on themselves. Alright, so that wasn't an option. What now?

He stared back at how his blade was still wedged in the wall. If he couldn't go over, then maybe he could go in?

::::

"Is it safe for him to be in the walls?" Shiro said worriedly from the observation deck. He couldn't shake the mental image of the walls tightening and crushing Keith between them.

Regris remarked, frowning, "It's safer than going underground."

"I doubt he will make it past the last Trial," said Antok, glancing at Kolivan, who remained stern faced.

"Which is...?" Hunk asked.

Kolivan stepped away from the window pane, his hands clasped behind his back, leaving the elongated blade at his hip in full display. "Me."

"What?" Shiro's head whipped around to face him. "You can't be serious."

"The boy does not have to win," Kolivan said shortly, shooting him a sneer. "Merely survive the duel until a certain recorded time of five doboshes. How else can we expect one to join our rankings?"

"He doesn't want to join your rankings, he just wants to know where his blade came from," Shiro said fiercely.

"He agreed to go through the Trials. That means all of them, regardless with what he chooses to do afterwards, should he survive."

"And if he doesn't last in the duel?"

Kolivan hesitated, for a moment. "I shall promise him a quick death."

"Takashi, say hello."

The baby in blankets is squirming, with a pink squishy face and a tuft of dark hair. Shiro is eight years old and his mother's hand is a warm weight on his shoulder. His mother's brother stands on the side of the bed, holding the baby in his arms. Keith is tiny and four months old, living in Arizona with his father. Shiro knows better than to ask where Keith's mother is, like how he wishes the kids at school would know better than to ask where his father is, too.

Instead, he gives his new cousin a little wave. "Hello." His mother squeezes his shoulder.
Uncle Akira holds Keith out to his sister. "Would you like to hold him, Gina?"

Shiro's mother takes the baby into her arms, cradling him with ease. "Mum's already seen him, I suppose?" she asks, referring to obasaan, Shiro's, and now Keith's, grandmother.

Uncle Akira grins. "Came by a month after the birth."

Shiro peers over the crook of her elbow. "It's my job to protect him, isn't it mama? Like how dad protected the whole world and me and you."

Gina ruffles his hair, tears welling in her eyes. "Well yes, I suppose it is. Keith is Uncle Akira's whole world now, and we're all going to take very good care of him, aren't we?"

Yes, he would.

"Like hell you are," Shiro growled, slinging out his arm as his prosthetic glowed purple, crackling with energy and fury behind his eyes.

The three Blades leapt back, Antok narrowing his eyes. "So you did break your word. I knew we could never trust a Paladin of Voltron.

"Regris and Antok, keep the Paladins contained," Kolivan ordered. "The boy should be exiting the maze walls any moment now. I will meet him for the last Trial."

"No—" Shiro stepped after him, but he swept through the doors and Antok and Regris stepped in front, blades drawn. He glanced back at Hunk, scowling.

He needed help. His family needed help. But Hunk didn't have a weapon, and Keith was still in a liability zone, and Allura and the rest of the castleship was trapped outside for who knew how many more vargas. But there was still someone here who could help, if she'd listen.

He closed his eyes, and untethered his mind.

Please, Black.

::::

After a few more bangs and stumbling around in the dark, the stuffy air getting harder and harder to breathe, Keith carved out another hole in the metal walls and fell out onto a new training deck, gasping for air. It was only when he staggered to his feet, his lungs heaving, that he saw Kolivan standing on the other side of a circular ring carved onto the floor, straight backed and proud. They were standing in a fighting ring, and Keith straightened up as Kolivan drew his blade and levelled it at Keith, a good ten feet away from him, before striking it to the side in an angular motion to his side.

"Knowledge," said Kolivan. "Or death."

Keith charged first. Blade swinging, Kolivan batted it out of the way as though his first strike was nothing, and Keith regretted the shorter stretch of his knife as compared to Kolivan's blade. Was that what his was supposed to be like? Or would it only activate by whoever it had previously belonged to? His mother? Kolivan sliced his blade upwards, and Keith reeled backwards, a thin cut over his elbow. Was his deadbeat mother worth dying for? Or maybe she wasn't a deadbeat. Maybe she was Galra. Maybe she had to leave even though she didn't want to. Maybe she had wanted him, after all.

"Shiro was right," Kolivan said with venom. "You never know when to quit."
Keith readjusted his grip on his knife as they circled each other, ready to parry or strike depending on the opportunity. "Isn't your whole slogan based on not quitting? On extremes? You can't expect me to quit when that would mean death."

Kolivan brought his blade down in quick strikes, and Keith barely blocked or dodged each successive blow, barreling backwards when Kolivan brought up his other arm and punched him hard in the stomach. All the air whooshed out of him, his blade clattering out of his hand, and Keith gritted his teeth as he struggled to get up, and Kolivan stalked towards him. If he could just land a hit...

"Then you misunderstand us too. Knowledge must be transmitted, transferred. You cannot do that when you're dead. If you must leave your team behind to get information out, then that is the sacrifice." Kolivan's jaw clenched, as Keith managed to grab his knife and raise it above as Kolivan brought his blade down on it, and Keith's arms bent, shaking in the struggle in keeping a larger opponent at bay.

With a growl, Kolivan removed his knife, and brought it down again and again on Keith's as he berated him. "But clearly you do not know what it means to be part of a team. You ran here, and they had to come chasing after you. You ran here not knowing anything. It would have been within my right to kill you for that crime alone."

Keith thrust his blade upwards, forcing Kolivan back, and sprang to his feet. "Then why didn't you?" he demanded. "If you hate me that much?" Panting, he lowered his blade slightly. "Look, I don't know how this Blade got to me. I don't know who it belonged to. But I'm sorry, alright? I know what it's like to lose people you care about. But that doesn't make it my fault that whoever had this Blade isn't around anymore."

Kolivan's face contorted, but then grew more composed as he stalked forwards, snarling, "Knowledge, or death," as though that was supposed to mean something different to Keith than it had every time before.

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"You cannot do that when you're dead. If you must leave... You never know when to quit."

Eleven years old, Keith watching his house burn against the night sky, begging his father not to go back in—to live and fight another day—only for him to run in—what could be so important?—and the purple blade cascading out of the upstairs window. By the time a neighbour called the firefighters, his father was gone. His father had died for this blade. Had his mother too? Did he want to follow in their footsteps?

"I just want to know who I am," he ground out, shutting his eyes, and light flashed against the backs of them. When he opened them, Kolivan was walking through the doors, and Shiro was running towards him. Keith's eyes widened. "Shiro? What are you doing here? Is—is the fight over?"

"I came here to rescue you," said Shiro, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder. "I made a bargain with the Blade. Just give up your knife, and we can go home."

"I can't give it to them, Shiro."

"Why?" Shiro said sternly. "What's so important about that thing?"

"It's all I have left of my parents. I might have a chance to find my mom—"

"Your mother didn't want you, Keith," Shiro snapped. "Now come back and—"

Keith shoved him backwards. "You never even met her! You don't get to decide she's worth giving
up on, when you left me too!" Tears sparked in his eyes. His body ached almost as badly as his heart. He was so tired. "You left me, you went to Kerberos! And then you died! You were all I had and you left me!"

"Yes, and I'm sorry for it," said Shiro tersely, glancing at the exits. "But just give you the knife, and I can get you into a cryopod back to the castleship, I've already radioed the others—"

"The others? Is everyone okay?"

Shiro looked even more annoyed. "Yes, everyone is fine, so just stop being difficult and—"

But Keith pushed him away again, stumbling back. "You're not Shiro." Because Shiro would never looked annoyed when telling him that their team was safe. He'd always say Allura and the others. He always set her apart. And he'd never ever look at him sternly when he was crying.

The hologram vanished in a flash, and Keith wanted to yell when he saw his father standing there instead. His black hair and kind eyes were exactly how Keith remembered. How dare the Blade sift through his memories and play with him like this? He took his knife and slashed at the second hologram, which fizzled out and he looked down at his reflection. His eyes were wild, hair matted with sweat, as he panted and tried to force his heart back into his chest instead of having it stuck in his throat.

Was this really all he was meant for?

Then he felt a tug in his gut, a fire licking at his veins, so strong it could have made him retch if it hadn't been strangely comforting and quieting the rage in his soul. His parents and Shiro couldn't back for him, not now. But maybe someone still could.

Someone who had been waiting for him as long as he'd been waiting for her.

Hello, Red.

:::

"The Red Lion is moving."

Allura's voice spiked with panic—if the Red Lion was on the move, that meant Keith was in danger, and if Keith was in danger, that meant the Shiro and Hunk were too—when Lance said, "We got bigger problems. Look!"

She raised her hands from her screens, her head whipping around the bridge, her remaining team in their chairs, and her stomach sank when she saw Galra ships entering the atmosphere. How had they been tracked this time? "Paladins, to your Lions—Coran, get the Red Lion's hangar door open, now. I'm going to try and get through and the warn the base."

She typed furiously as Coran, Lance, and Pidge dashed to fulfill their duties, and she grit her teeth. This was exactly why she hadn't wanted Hunk to go with Shiro; now they were down three Lions and three Paladins, and—

"Come on—come on—Paladins?" Breath crackled across the commlink, a grunt—someone was fighting? "Shiro?"

"—Allura? Allura!" Shiro's voice broke over the commlink, relieved even if his breath seemed stifled, and she could have cried.
"Shiro, the Galra have found us! You need to get out of there as soon as you can—"

"Keith is still going through the Trials, Hunk and I are trying to get to him but—" There was a slam and a cheer from Shiro. Hunk had taken one of the Blades down, perhaps? "We're on our way," he promised. "I've reached out to the Black Lion, but she hasn't responded. What's happening on your end?"

"The Red Lion is on its way to Keith. Get to the Black Lion as fast as you can. If Zarkon is travelling with the fleet, you will have him to contend with."

"Alright." She could picture him motioning to Hunk for them to go through the door, and then they'd be moving throughout the base. Who knew if the signal would hold, as they drifted away or closer towards the communications channel she had managed to access. And he seemed to know it too, as he said, "Allura?" a trace of hesitance in his voice.

"Yes Shiro?"

"Stay safe. We'll see you on the other side."

She smiled faintly to herself. "You too. I'll have a wormhole at the ready."

Shiro seemed to linger a moment, his breath paused, as though he wanted to say something else, and then thought better of it and said to Hunk, rather roughly, "Let's go. We have no time to lose," and she lost the connection after that. For now, all she could do was wait and hope her boys managed to warn the Blade in time so that no harm would be done.

If it wasn't too late.

:::

When his blade flashed light again, Keith found Kolivan staring back at him, unimpressed, in the same spot he'd been before the first flash. A new rush of fury hit him, as Keith realized it'd all been in his head: another mind trick, just like the memories. Still, this time Keith didn't charge him, and fixed him with a fierce glare instead.

"How dare you," he demanded. "What sort of sick organization is this, to mess with your members heads, to use their minds against him?"

Kolivan merely blinked, his face set in a heavy scowl. "It is nothing the Empire won't do. You need to be prepared."

"For what? You're still going to kill me, aren't you? I didn't pass your stupid Trials."

"You passed them," said Kolivan tightly, as though the admittance caused him physical pain. "But you did not awaken your Blade. If you want to leave the base, you must leave it here. Your friends have come to take you back."

They had come back for him? Guilt curdled unexpectedly in his stomach. He'd known Shiro would be worried, but... the others had come too? Shiro had wanted allies, and instead Keith knew he'd been used as a bargaining chip. Allura would be ticked, too, which meant Shiro would be ticked, on hers and his own behalf. Keith knew he'd never hear the end of it from Lance, either. Just how much had he ruined things by running away?

He looked back at his blade, still clutched in one hand. It had never felt heavier.
And then he held it out to Kolivan.

"As a peace offering," he said, as evenly and calmly as he could. "We all need to work together to defeat Zarkon. If that means I give up this knife, fine. Take it."

His blade glowed, and for a second the light was blinding, until it extended, steeping into a broader and sharper curve, and he blinked in surprise. Kolivan's jaw went slack in shock. "It can't be..." His wide eyes met Keith's. "Galra blood does flow through your veins."

Keith was trying to figure out how to respond to that—was his mother Galra? A grandparent? How far back did it go, and how much did it matter?—to Kolivan's guarded expression, as though he wasn't sure what to make of things either, and then a few things happened all at once.

First: the metal dome of the deck split open from the ceiling, distilled starlight pouring in, and the talons of the Red Lion's claws and gleam of her yellow eyes. Too late she may have been, but Keith still understood his Lion had responded to his distress. She'd come back for him, too.

Second: the doors at the end of the ring opened, and Antok came running through, one of his shoulder pads dented. "The paladins escaped," he panted, as Kolivan rushed to him, checking for an injury. "Regris is still out cold—the big yellow one got him—but we have bigger problems. The paladins have let Zarkon track them to our base."

Kolivan's eyes flashed. "What?"

"I've ordered the evacuations, I went to comm you but our channels were blocked by some outside signal—I think it was coming from the princess' castle."

He whirled around towards Keith. "You sabotaged us." He moved faster than seemed possible, and lifted Keith up by his neck, his weapon poised and Keith's having fallen on the ground. "I ought to kill you right now—"

Keith prepared himself for the blow, for the sword sliding into his stomach, as the Red Lion struggled to get through the small hole in the ceiling, rumbling in distress. But the blow never came. Cautiously, Keith eyes opened. Kolivan was staring at him, an undefinable expression on his face, and then his grip slackened. He was going to drop him. He was going to let him go.

The doors swished open again, and a blast hit Kolivan in the back and he crumpled. Hunk rose up behind him at the door, followed by Shiro, a gun held in the former's hands, and Keith spied the knob that set it to stun, as he picked himself up from the floor. Shiro kept his arm ablaze and at Antok, who seemed unsure of what to do, injured and a leader down with the alarms finally going off around the base, flashing red and blaring.

Keith let himself sag as Shiro and Hunk picked himself up on the floor. "I'm sorry—"

But Shiro ignored him, looking at Antok. "You all need to get out of here. The Galra and Zarkon are here. We'll do our best to give you cover fire, while you evacuate."

Antok glovered at him, but nodded. "Do not think that we will forget this slight," he snarled, and then draped Kolivan's hulking arm around his shoulders and helped him to his feet as they staggered out the exit.

The ceiling split open as the Red Lion finally finished clawing her way through, and Keith raised his head weakly. "Thanks for coming to get me girl. Good kitty."

Shiro made sure Hunk had a good grip on Keith. "Both of you, get back to the Castleship and help
defend whoever needs it the most. The princess will tell you what to do. I'm going to go get the Black Lion; I'll be right out behind you."

Keith struggled against Hunk's grasp. "Shiro, wait!"

But Hunk forced him up the open maw of the Red Lion anyway, and sealed them into safety, as Shiro disappeared behind the same door Kolivan and Antok had gone through.

No. Keith's fingers curled into fists, against the floor of his Lion when Hunk set him down in the cockpit. Don't leave me again.

:::

The base was falling to pieces. Chunks of stone and metal lay scattered along the hallways, lights broken and alarms blaring, sparks from shattered bulbs fizzing across the corridors as Shiro sprinted down them. It was hard to tell whether the base had been attacked, or if it had gone into some sort of self-destructive protocol, but either way, there wasn't much time left to get out.

Shiro skidded down one hallway, a piece of the hallway peeling off and nearly hitting him as it blocked off the rest of his pathway.

"Quiznak."

He'd have to find another route. He back-pedalled to the previous intersection, going left where he had gone right, and a sign in Galran pointed down the hallway. He couldn't read the characters, but the symbol was distinctive enough now that he took the time to look at it, a ship over a straight line: the hangar. He was almost to his Lion.

And then he saw the Blade member lying crumpled on the ground the next hallway over. Shiro stopped, looking at the open doors ahead of him, and then at the girl. She was smaller than the other Blades, slimmer. Younger? He turned her over and her mask fell away, a soft exhalation escaping her lips. So she was alive. Her face, a pale purple with white brows struck him as familiar, but he couldn't place why.

The building shook, and it jarred him back to reality. The hangar was there, but if the base had gone into self-destructive protocol, it would inevitably be destroyed. Who knew how long they'd stay open? Still, he couldn't leave her. He'd bring her along in the Black Lion. Maybe she'd know how to communicate with the Blade and get them back in touch, if only so she could go home, even if it wouldn't help mend their burned bridges and build an alliance.

Shiro hoisted her arm over his shoulder, glad her dead weight wasn't too much, and moved to the hangar quickly as possible. He made his way over to the Black Lion, waiting for the gleam of her eyes, for her to open her mouth and let them in, but it wasn't coming. Debris fell from the ceiling. Everything was shaking.

"Black, please!" He banged a fist against her nose. "I don't know what I did to lose you, I don't know what Zarkon did to you, but I need you—"

Hadin't he been just as reckless as Keith, going after him with barely a game plan? Without knowing how they were being tracked? It was his mistake at Zarkon's central command. Except no, that couldn't be a mistake, because they had saved Allura—and lost everything else. Each other, the Black Lion. Her saving him on the rock planet had been a fluke. No. That couldn't be right, either.

Shiro splayed his fingers over her nose, tears sparking in his eyes. "No. I'm not giving up on you."
The Lion roared, and enveloped them as the base exploded.
Lira

Chapter Summary

Keith's Galra heritage is revealed. Lira wakes up.

ARC II: The Traitor

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Lira

alternatively titled

*Three Cryopods, Two Alteans, and One Galra (Oh My!)*

:::

Shiro made it out by the skin of his teeth.

Allura watched the arc of the Black Lion, illuminated by the explosion as the base and the pocket of space it was hidden away in collapsed in on itself, from the bridge of the castleship, light glowing underneath her hands as she prepped a wormhole. The particle barrier wouldn't hold much longer, and she'd summoned some wormholes for the Blade of Marmora, inputting coordinates as Coran got them from one named Kolivan, to help them get away.

Plenty more ships had been destroyed by the Galra fleet at their backs, and greater numbers would have perished if Lance and Pidge hadn't done their best to keep them at bay. Hunk had gone out to join the others, after landing and getting Keith into a cryopod, before sailing out with Yellow, and she connected to their commlinks once Shiro cleared the explosion.

"Paladins, back to the castle," she ordered. "We're worm-holing."

The rest of the Lions sailed into the Castle as Shiro covered them with some heavy handed fire, and Allura summoned the wormhole, wanting to wait but knowing she couldn't. Shiro would simply have to make it inside in time. (She didn't want to consider any other possibility.)

She made sure the hangars were clear, the Paladins rushing to their stations as she kept the Black Lion's hangar open, hoping one of the smaller Galra fighters wouldn't get the bright idea to try and board. She keyed up the commlink. "Shiro, where are you? We're almost ready to go—"

"I'm in a bit of a tight spot at the moment," he huffed, and she saw his Lion swivel between two fighters and shoot them down.

"Just get in the wormhole," he said, "I'll make it in time."

"Shiro—"
"Princess—"

"This isn't up for debate," she said hotly. "Your only objective now is to get your Lion in the castleship as quickly as possible. There is nothing of the Galra base worth salvaging, so leave it. That's an order."

There was a silence full of static, and then Shiro's terse tone tore out, "Yes, princess."

She cranked up the power gears as Hunk got Keith situated in a cryopod, and Coran turned on their powering crystal and connected teladuv. The Black Lion's hangar doors clanged shut once Shiro touched down, and Allura rammed the castle into a wormhole at light speed; she heard the faint crunch of Galra fighters crashing against each other once the wormhole sealed behind the castle, and they sped through the blue, whirling void.

She'd given them a far enough jump it would take a good ten minutes to exit, and she wondered what was taking Shiro so long he didn't enter the bridge until the jump was almost over. She had half a mind to call him, or send Coran to check on him, when he stumbled through the doors and Allura, a girl garbed in purple in his arms.

"Shiro, what—" Lance began.

"She needs help," Shiro said, wheezing. There were skid marks on his helmet. "Where's Keith?"

Lance and Allura went to his sides, Allura bracing an arm against his back to make sure he was steady, as Lance led them to a cryopod, and she got a better look at the girl. She was young, Galra, a Blade. Soft features, a hardened mouth, and blood dripping down one side of her brow.

"He's in a cryopod," Pidge answered. "Who's she?"

"I don't know," Shiro said, and Coran opened up a pod at just a look from the Black Paladin. "But I couldn't just leave her."

"You should get in a cryopod too," Allura said, as the cryopod Coran fitted sealed the girl away beside Keith, and Shiro turned to face her. Cryopod suits helped, but weren't necessary. She reached up and touched the dent in his helmet, and the slight crack along his visor. He'd kept it open over his mouth, and the hard line of his jaw. She quickly snatched her hand away. "You got quite... roughed up out there."

His eyes still looked like he wanted to be annoyed with her, even as the corner of his mouth ticked upwards. "Roughed up?"

"Just get in the cryopod," she said sternly, the tips of her ears feeling warm.

Thankfully, this time Shiro didn't argue with her, and Allura rubbed at her temples with the base of her palms once all three were sealed away in a cryopod. The pods didn't come with the function of saying how much time it would take for the person to be released—a defense mechanism to protect Alteans, such as herself, who were rather hapless when sealed away for however long—but she knew it'd likely take almost a full quintant. She needed to figure out their next steps. She needed time alone.

"Coran," she said, "see if you can make safe contact with the Blades' communication channels. Paladins," Pidge, Lance, and Hunk snapped to attention, "you are permitted to leave the bridge and rest and eat, but at least one of you must be here at all time. Call me when any of them awake. I'm going to go take care of some other matters."
The sobs had built in her throat to the point of bursting a hallway before she reached the darkened A.I. chamber that had once made Altea seem nearly tangible. The holo-platform that had once housed her father's memory had been broken for months but she still came to sit and imagine his counsel from fragments of time and wisps of conversation. How she wished had gotten a chance to ask more questions, to be better prepared for a time like this.

She reached into the hollow base and took out a framed holograph, which emitted a faint blue glow over her face and tear stained cheeks. There was her father, young, with his goatee and yellow accents to his armour: a symbol of his time as a Paladin. And there was her mother, arm in arm with him, her pink markings like dimples when she smiled, which had been often. It was one of the only things Allura could remember about her mother, the warmth of her smile, and the way her chubby hands had reached for the dark, shimmery purple strands of her mother's hair.

Allura bowed her head and cried for who knew how long, the anxiety of the past few hours finally catching up with her, and the knowledge they'd ultimately gained nothing for all of it. If anything, they'd lost things she hadn't even wanted, but the loss still stung. Such a thing always would. It was like the loss of her mother, she knew, her fingers coming up to touch her circlet. No matter how many years, the ache of absence never quite went away. She knew it'd been the same for her father; Coran had done his best to cover it up, but it was clear Alfor had never been the same after Amara's death.

“You're going to be queen one day, he'd said. You'll need someone you can rely on, who can match you, beat for beat. Who will never begrudge you for the sacrifices you have to make. Such a partner is very rare. Your mother and I were very lucky to find one another.

She looked at the picture in her hands, tears blurring her vision. "I know you each had to make some hard choices," she croaked. "But I have to make one now, and I... I don't know what to do. You always had each other to lean on, and when you didn't..." Ruling was hard without a partner. Her father had made that clear.

And now her co-leader was sealed away in a cryopod, and she had no idea of what her next step should be without him helping her figure out where to fly next. Some leader she was.

She sniffled and wiped at her eyes.

Where to fly next... It wouldn't matter where they flew next, she knew suddenly, because Zarkon would always find them. Because they would always have the Black Lion.

Allura raised her head, and ambled to her feet, chest burning with purpose. With Zarkon being able to connect to the Black Lion, was what she'd said to Lance. If her own life force could be bonded to the Lion, and still remain ten thousand years later, then why couldn't Zarkon's old powers with the Lion exist as well? A sensor, a traction—a tracking device. They'd been ambushed at the Blade, and well—she'd need Shiro to confirm the details—she was willing to bank on this hunch, as she strode to the Black Lion's hangar.

If that was how they were being tracked, then she was going to fix it however she could. She was halfway to the hangar

"Princess?"

Coran's voice over the commlinks made her pause. "Yes?" There was the faint sound of a cryopod unsealing, and a stumble, and her heart lifted. "Is Shiro—"

"Keith, first," Coran said. "But he seems in tip-top shape—"
"Keep him there," she ordered. "I'm on my way."

But first, she had another issue to deal with right now.

When she got back to the bridge, Hunk was setting the Red Paladin down from a hug, now that the boy had pulled his armour back on. The Marmora member and Shiro were still sleeping away behind the gilded blue walls, and the paladins and Coran looked nervously between Keith and Allura, Hunk stepping away with a hesitant smile. Must he always be hopeful? And Keith. She narrowed her eyes, as she fixed them on him, and the boy didn't flinch. Must he always be brash?


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Lance winced, as the shouting continued outside the bridge, muffled by the walls. "How much longer do you think it's gonna be?"

Hunk shrugged. "I dunno. It's been a while already. Maybe another fifteen minutes?" They winced when Allura's voice reached a new peak.

"I mean, he does kinda deserve it," Pidge considered.

Hunk opened his mouth as though to protest, and then thought back on all that had happened, the destruction of the base, the near misses at Taujeer. "Yeah," he sighed. "He kinda does. Still sucks though."

Lance clapped him on the shoulder. "It all sucks. But hey, it seemed like you did great out there, buddy! You're the only one who came back all in one piece, and you got Keith out of there. I'm sure Shiro was really glad to have you with him."

"Right you are, Number Two," Coran said. "I'm not surprised at all you were the princess' second pick, after Shiro of course—" He chortled to himself, as if in on an inside joke, as he added, "But I expect just about anyone to her would be."

"Thanks," Hunk said, not quite managing a smile, "but—" Their voices were drowned out by another shout, and he closed his mouth, the fight seemingly reaching its height when they finally heard Keith speak up, through the walls.

"YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW I MESSED UP?!!"

There was a slam, a dent thrown into the wall, and Allura shook her fist out on the other side, glaring. "You could have cost Shiro, all of us, all of the Blades, our lives," she hissed, her voice deadly calm even as her eyes trembled. "But you chose to think only of yourself, and I expected better from a paladin of Voltron, from a team member! Now I hardly think we can rely on you at all, much less when it matters! and—" She inhaled sharply, trying to regulate your temper. "Shiro told me you were getting better. I suppose he was wrong. You're dismissed to do whatever you like for the rest of the day. Just know that you'll be monitored to ensure you don't go running off again—and don't do anything stupid, although how you could make a worse decision than the one you already have, I do not know."

Keith's throat bobbed, as he swallowed hard. His eyes were glassy. "Allura—"

She looked away, her mouth a thin, firm line. "Go," she said flatly. She was going to start crying again, if he didn't.
Keith's eyes hardened, before he set his shoulders and walked away, down towards the paladin rooms and training deck, and well away from the hangars. Allura watched him go, wondering what Shiro would think of her, if he saw her now. If he would have stepped in, said she was being too harsh. But he wasn't here to do that, because of Keith's mistake, now was he? She swallowed the lump in her throat, and drew up the commlink.

"Coran?" she said, setting up a solo channel. "I'm going to go check on the Black Lion. I have an idea. You watch over the bridge. Get the paladins something to eat... even Keith. But leave someone with Shiro and the Marmora girl at all times. I'll be there soon to take over."

Her advisor's reply was a speedy, "Yes, princess," and she loosed a long breath. At least she could still rely on him.

:::

Keith took the plate of goo offered in the dining hall, and left as quickly as he could. He didn't want to put up with the others questioning or pitying glances, or sad attempts at small talk to ignore the elephant in the room. He'd messed up worse than he ever had in his life, worse than getting kicked out of the Garrison and having nowhere left to go. Worse than when he'd crashed his bike and spent a week hauling all the pieces back up the cliff once his sprained ankle had healed. Worse than—

His shoulders sagged when he reached the Red Lion's hangar, feeling the warm hum of his Lion tickling the back of his mind. She didn't seem pleased with him either, upset that he'd run into danger once more, but sitting by her paws he still felt welcome. He couldn't say the same would have applied with the rest of his team right now... if it had ever?

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, once he'd given up on eating his plate of goo; he didn't have much of an appetite. "Why do I ruin everything?"

"I dunno," came a voice, the doors swishing close behind it. "Maybe it's because you never realize what you have while you have it?"

His eyes snapped open, a frown crossing his face as he saw Pidge walking towards him. "Pidge, what are you doing here?"

She shrugged, flopping down next to him even as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Came to steal your plate of goo. I didn't get any since I had to stay behind with the pods." She picked up the plate. "You gonna finish this?" He shrugged, and she started spearing pieces of goo with his untouched spork. "So," she said, mulling over the word, "what're you doing here?"

"This is my Lion's hangar," he said defensively. "What are you doing here?"

She shrugged, flopping down next to him even as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Came to steal your plate of goo. I didn't get any since I had to stay behind with the pods." She picked up the plate. "You gonna finish this?" He shrugged, and she started spearing pieces of goo with his untouched spork. "So," she said, mulling over the word, "what're you doing here?"

"This is my Lion's hangar," he said defensively. "What are you doing here?"

She raised her eyebrows, unimpressed. "You know, when I wanted to leave the team you got all in my face about it. You could've at least done me the favour of letting me do it back to you." She looked over at him, glasses glinting. "So. What happened, Keith?"

He sighed, and looked away. "I... I don't know," he managed. He knew it was a lousy answer. "I just—"

"You had to know the truth," she finished. "I get it. That's why I kinda figured you'd be here. At the Garrison, whenever I was really missing my family, I'd climb up on the roof, and search for signals. It's how I knew aliens were out there, and... that Matt and my dad had to be too." She pursed her lips, sympathy shining in her eyes. "Trust me, I know what it's like to feel like you're going to lose your mind if you don't figure something out, but you gotta think it through next time, man. Do you
know how much planning went into forging a new identity? Then again..." She drew her knees to her chest, and rested her chin on top of them, deflating. "At least you didn't cut your hair and change your name and leave your mom all alone on earth. Now instead of thinking just my dad and brother are dead, she thinks I'm dead too."

Keith slowly softened, and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Well," he coughed, "Lance does always say I need a haircut."

Pidge puffed out a laugh, and looked up at him. "What I'm saying is, I know things are rough right now and that Allura's really mad, but... things are gonna get better, and you're gonna get a chance to make up for this, and Shiro's going to be fine, and the rest of us are ready to start teasing you endlessly about it first chance you get, so stop moping and stop avoiding us, maybe?"

The corner of his mouth twitched upwards. "Maybe," he promised, and squeezed her shoulder before letting go. "Thanks, Pidge. I'm uh, not used to people coming after me."

"Neither am I, honestly," she admitted. "I mean, Matt was my best, or really only friend, growing up, and then he... disappeared and it sucks, because there are some things I think he'd really understand but he's not, here, so..."

"Well..." Keith cleared his throat. "I know I'm not your brother but, you can always come to me, y'know. If you want to. To talk. I mean, you don't have to, Lance or Shiro might be better choices, or —"

"I think I'm nonbinary."

Pidge said this in one hurried breath, and Keith raised his eyebrows. "Oh. Okay. Cool. So, like, nonbinary as your identifier, or somewhere along the nonbinary spectrum, or—? If you know, I mean, you don't have to. I know figuring out gender and sexuality can be weird."

Pidge swallowed. "I think... just nonbinary fits me best. Coran knows, the Alteans have a really good word for it too, and I've been trying out they/them pronouns in my head, but I'm not sure they fit right now, so... I don't know. I'm not used to not having answers."

"I think you're going through a pretty ordinary experience. I mean, you're still trying to get used to new pronouns right? Of course that's gonna take some time." Keith smiled. "Patience yields focus. You'll get there. If you want me to start using they/them pronouns, I can do that too."

Pidge's shoulders eased, a smile tugging at the green paladin's mouth. "Yeah. That'd be good. Thanks Keith." They scrunched their brows. "Is there anything else you wanna talk about?" they half-teased.

Keith reached behind his back, and took out his blade. It was still elongated to its awakened size, not having shrunk down yet. "This is one of the knives all the Blades of Marmora get. I've had it ever since I was born, and... it proves that somehow, I'm part Galra. Even though I have no idea how, or how much, and the Blades probably hate me since I destroyed their base, so... who knows if I'll ever get to find out." He dropped his gaze to the floor. "Or if I should tell the team."

"Does Shiro know?"

"He never said anything, but..." Keith turned the knife over in his hands. "He was seven when I was born. I don't know how he never would've met my mum, but—right now I mostly just need to apologize to him, first, for wrecking all of this."

"You'll get to," Pidge assured him. "And... did you actually apologize to Allura?"
He winced. "Not... really. I thought it'd be understood!" he exasperated.

Pidge arched their eyebrows, unimpressed. "Yeah. Don't think so."

"Fine," Keith grumbled, and then sighed. "Yeah, you're right."

"Aren't I always?" Pidge stood up, and extended a hand.

Keith loosed a light chuckle, but took their hand and pulled himself up. "No."

"Up for debate," they said decidedly. "Now come on, and come eat with the rest of us, dummy. We're all waiting outside Shiro's pod now. Hunk has extra goo."

Keith let them pull him out of the room, and back onto the bridge. Lance was stretched out on the steps outside of Shiro's pod and leaning against Hunk, and both smiled when they saw him and Pidge. "You done sulking, Mr Lone Wolf?" Lance asked.

Keith shot him a stern look, and tried not to smile. "Shut up," he muttered, squeezing himself in between Lance and Hunk and leaning against both of them.

It was nice, to not have to wait for Shiro alone, for once.

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"Please..." Allura pressed her palms over the Black Lion's nose, head bent as though in prayer. "I know I'm not your paladin, but if you would entrust me with your secrets, we could all learn so much. We could save so many lives. I know you're scared," she murmured. "And I know what Zarkon did to you was partially my family's fault, but please, we need your help, I need—"

"Princess?"

She sighed in frustration, lowering her hands and hating the flash of her earrings. "Yes, Coran?"

"Shiro's awake."

Allura ran to the bridge as fast as she could, her heart in her throat. She slowed her pace measurably so she could walk through the bridge doors with composed grace, but she couldn't keep from smiling when she saw Shiro out of his pod, being greeted and hugged by the other paladins. Hunk was handing him a cup of steamed choconunvill (something similar to what Earthlings called coffee, apparently) to help him warm up.

She wanted to hug him, but knew now wasn't the time, as she kept her steps steady and walked towards him, unable to help herself from placing her hands on his shoulders. "It is good to have you back, Shiro," she said, smiling slightly.

"What's happened since I've been out?" he asked, once she stepped away and he took a sip of his coffee.

"I believe I've figured out how Zarkon is tracking us," Allura said, guiding him over to her station and pulling up telescreens. "It is through—"

"—the Black Lion," he finished. The team inhaled sharply around him.

Allura looked at him. "So you've come to the same conclusion."

"I realized it back at the Marmora base," Shiro said. "It's the only thing that made sense, of how the
Galra found us even hidden by the Blade's technology. And that he was only able to start tracking us once I had lost control of my Lion at his central command. Until we break his connection with her, we won't be safe."

"That can be our upmost priority once you've had a few more hours to recover. I already have a theory in place of how we can best break his control." Her eyes hardened, as she looked over his shoulder and back towards the team. "I also disciplined Keith for his transgressions."

The two co-leaders turned around to face the Red Paladin, who was shuffling his feet, and Shiro pinched the bridge of his nose. "Can I ground him in space? If so I'm grounding him in space."

"Ground'?'" Coran piped up.

"It's like a... set of extra restrictions, usually enforced by parents."

"You don't need to ground me, Shiro," Keith said indignantly. "I already know I messed up, and I'm going to make it right. Allura, Shiro, I'm sorry. I made a mistake, I should have waited to go to the Blades with you guys, but I had to go—"

Shiro's impatience rose. "You didn't have to do anything. Going to the Blade or not was not your concern. Keith, you put all of us in danger, including the Blade of Marmora. What could have been so important you had to run off and leave us like that—"

"I had to know if I was Galra." Keith held out his knife, the Marmora emblem still glowing. "And I am. How much, I don't know. But when I saw Ulaz's blade, and I realized it looked like my own, I—I had to know. But I didn't think it through." He swallowed hard. "I didn't think about how much danger I'd be putting you all in, or anything, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I put all of you at risk." He looked back at his team, shock etched over their faces, eyes searching his face; whatever they had expected, it hadn't been this. "If I could go back and do it all differently, I would. I should've trusted you to trust me."

"Galra," Allura repeated stiffly. Coran's entire face had gone a blank, chalky white. "You're Galra. I can't believe..."

"Does it really matter?" said Pidge, raising a hand, and Keith shot them a grateful look. "I mean, it could even be from a distant great-grandparent or something."

"True," Lance hummed. He stepped towards Keith and picked at the mullet. "He doesn't look Galra. Where's the purple? The furry ears?"

Keith swatted his hand away. "Look—I don't know how much. And not all Galra have furry ears anyway. Remember Ulaz?"

"Ulaz..." The pod next to Shiro's opened, and the Marmora girl stumbled out, clutching her head. The cut on her pale purple brow was healed, her ears large, pointed and batty, and sticking up between chunks of her grey-white hair that fell to her chin in a choppy cut. Lance moved to catch her just in time, and eased her into a sitting position, as she blearily opened her eyes. "Where... where am I?"

Shiro stepped forwards. "You're on the Castle of Lions. My name is Shiro. Do you remember anything of the attack?"

The girl numbly nodded. "I remember... the Galra. Explosions. The walls started collapsing in and we had to evacuate. Regris was trying to get me to a pod—there was a Trial going on." She looked up at Shiro and her eyes widened. "You—you're the Champion." She took in his armour, and of the
others, and she leapt to her feet, moving backwards. "You're Paladins."

Lance held up his hands. "Whoa, hey, we're not gonna hurt you."

The girl withdrew her blade, keeping her eyes trained on Shiro. "How are you Altean? I thought they were all dead." Her eyes skidded across the others, landing on Allura, and then going back to Lance. "But... your ears?"

"We're not Alteans," Shiro said calmly. "We're humans. We're from a planet far away from here, called Earth."

"And you can lower your knife," said Keith crossly. He held up his. "We're not your enemy."

The girl narrowed her eyes at him. "I know you," she snarled at Keith. "You were the one in the Trials. The one that led the Galra to us. You destroyed my home. You traitor!"

Keith tucked his knife away. "I'm sorry," he said, but she didn't soften. "I didn't mean for it to happen."

"Uh, excuse me, Miss Galra lady," Hunk spoke up, and she shot him a sharp look. "But how did you know Shiro was the Champion?"

"My uncle is the one who freed him," she said.

Shiro stepped towards her. "Your uncle was Ulaz?"

She nodded. "He was a brave warrior, may the stars shine upon him for his sacrifice. Still, I don't understand. He spoke of your achievements, but... why would he free you? It wasn't part of his mission."

"He sent me to find the Blue Lion on Earth," Shiro explained. "To keep Voltron safe. He believed in it. In us. He died protecting that dream. If you're truly his niece, that must mean something to you."

The girl ground her teeth. "My name is Lira Astero. I followed my uncle into the Blades for a moral cause, and a just universe... And in response you destroy our base. You cannot expect the Blade to trust you without penance."

"Penance?" Lance repeated, looking between her and Allura nervously.

"Atonement," said Allura sternly, "or repayment, for crimes. But one must ask why."

Lira raised her chin, and stowed away her knife. It shrank by her side. "Do you truly think you can win this war alone? I've heard the rumours. That Princess Allura lives again. But while you slept, we fought. If we have not been able to overthrow the empire, what makes you think you can? Voltron?"

Shiro stepped in front of Allura, shooting her a look that was both sympathetic, and a warning. "If we were to win the Blades' trust, how would we go about it?"

"Helping them secure the materials needed to build another base wouldn't hurt."

"We have more pressing matters to deal with at the moment," Allura said tightly. "And you are still battered. We all are. I think it is in your best interest to dwell within the castle for the time being, until we can think about our next steps. Ulaz sacrificed himself to save us. If you wish you aid us, and thank Shiro for saving your life, you must give us time. A quintant, at least."

Lira slowly looked at all of them, and muttered under her breath, before nodding. "Fine."
"That does not mean, however, we are interested in a partnership with your people."

"Princess." Shiro looked at her, his brow creased. "We don't just owe the Blades my freedom. We owe them yours too. We should at least consider a fresh start."

"It can't hurt," Pidge considered.

"Uh, it very well can, if it goes wrong." Hunk said. "They're all 'we walk alone,' and really set against Voltron. Who even says they're gonna be interested in a partnership with us no matter what we do?"

"Oh come on Hunk," said Lance. "We can be allies with the Blade. It doesn't mean we have to walk into the sunset holding hands and singing Kumbaya or anything."

Lira narrowed her eyes. "It is amazing you have survived this long as a species." But she sighed, and crossed her arms over her chest. "I will help you. If my uncle believed in Voltron, I suppose I must as well. But you have to trust me."

"Trust a Galra," Coran scoffed, and they all looked at him in surprise. "You ask for much, young one." His eyes slid over to Keith. "You both do."

Shiro raised his eyebrows, and went to put a hand on his shoulder. "Coran—"

But the advisor stepped away. "If you need me, I'll be in my quarters."

"Coran—"

Allura grabbed Shiro's arm before the Black Paladin could go after him, the bridge's doors swishing closed. "Let him go. We each have... much to process."

Shiro swallowed, but turned back around to face everyone else. "If we were to give being allies with the Blades another shot, how would you guys feel about it? Hunk, you spent the most time with the Blades another shot, how would you guys feel about it? Hunk, you spent the most time with them outside me."

Hunk readjusted his head band. "I dunno," he said. "I mean, we tried and everything went wrong, and they don't seem interested in it either. I say we cut our losses and focus on the allies we do have, like the Balmerans and stuff."

"Pidge?"

The green paladin shrugged. "It's fine by me either way. I wouldn't mind learning more about how their technology works though."

"Keith?"

The teen looked up, as though jarred from his thoughts. "I don't know," he admitted. "It's gonna be a lot of work if we try and ally with them, though."

Shiro turned towards the Blue Paladin. "Lance?"

"I think we should," he considered. "I mean, what other options do we have? If they're not our allies then they might become our enemies, and we don't need more of them."

"That's the smartest thing you've said this whole conversation," Lira remarked. Lance glared at her.

"Princess?" Shiro asked.
Allura's face was hard. "I swore to myself I'd never trust a Galra again after what happened to my people. But this war is larger than the destruction of my home planet. If trusting the Galra again in order to save many more people's home planets is what you deem necessary, than I'll go along with whatever you think is best, Shiro."

Shiro gave her a small, half-hearted smile, and then strode towards Lira and extended his hand. "Welcome to Team Voltron, Lira."

Lira gripped his forearm. "This is a temporary alliance, Champion. I want to go back to my people once we're finished here."

"And you will," Shiro promised her. "And the princess wasn't wrong. We're all pretty battered. The paladins will show you around and get you set up in a room of your own, and we'll meet for dinner in a few vargas. We have a bit of breathing room until our next mission, so use it to take care of yourselves, team."

Allura remained at her station like a statue, as the other paladins and Lira filtered out of the room, and Shiro stepped up behind her. "Princess?"

"Hm?"

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." She turned around and smiled, although it fell flat. "Merely... thinking. We should go see the Black Lion. Begin the next stage of the plan."

"Allura." Shiro tugged her forwards, and hugged her, and she melted into him, her mask breaking. She held onto him for a few extra ticks, and then pulled away, her eyes bright.

"Thank you," she smiled, and it reached her eyes as she went down the few steps from her station, and looked back at him. "Now, are you ready?"

Shiro gave her a small smile, and went down the first step. "I'll follow you anywhere, princess."
The history of Voltron and the Altean royal family is revealed (partially, anyway).

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARC II: The Traitor

CHAPTER TWELVE: Legendary Defender

The Black Lion was tall and solemn in her hangar, when Shiro and Allura entered. "She's been silent, since you made it back," Allura told him. "I was here earlier, but she wouldn't respond to me. Not that I expected her to, but I thought since my quintessence is linked with all the Lions, perhaps..."

"It's alright," Shiro assured her. "She doesn't always respond to me. I thought she might not, in the base, but she did. She saved me." He turned towards Allura. "Help me save her. What can I do to break Zarkon's hold on her?"

They approached the Lion together. "There is a very old paladin-Lion bonding ritual. A transfer of memories, from the Lion's consciousness, to yours. You won't be able to enact it on your own—you're not an Altean alchemist, but the process is supposed to be between a paladin and their Lion only..." Allura gnawed on her bottom lip.

Shiro offered her a smile. "I trust you."

"It's also very intense," she warned. "Once we begin, we won't be able to stop until the Lion has decided we've seen enough—if she chooses to show us anything. And not everything you're going to see will be pleasant, I can assure you that."

"Is it the best way to free Black from Zarkon?" At Allura's nod, Shiro set his shoulders. "Then we should at least give it a try. What do I need to do?"

Allura took his hand, and placed it on the Lion's nose. "Keep it there," she said. "And then..." She placed her hand over his, and Shiro felt a rush, as their quintessence mixed and Allura's eyes glowed, the thrum of his Lion warm under his hand, and then the Black Lion's eyes flashed and everything else was gone.

The world split open in a fracture of light from darkness, as the Black Lion emerged from her pod and spilled onto a silvery floor. They were people, faces, crowding around her, with pointed ears and markings around their eyes. Her legs wouldn't work quite right when she tried to stand, too wobbly, consciousness imparted as a gift. Quintessence was warm and flowing, and the crowd shied away except for one woman, who was grinning broadly.
"Oh, she's beautiful," the woman cooed, and scooped the Lion up in her arms. Black purred, the size of a massive house cat, metal joints and fresh black paint covered in a sort of slippery film. Her yellow eyes matched the woman's arched markings, and the broken pod the Lion had been, for lack of a better word, hatched from, lay at the woman's feet. "My Black. My ebony." Their brows touched, and Black got a rush of visions, words. Sisters, Alteans, alchemy, magic. Further back, beyond the baby's understanding, was something called war.

The woman scratched underneath the Lion's chin, and someone off to the side handed the woman a blanket, and she began to wipe the goop from the Lion's shiny coat. The Black Lion nuzzled against her, thrumming, and the woman laughed. She had brown skin and white, blue tinted hair that fell down her back. Her robes were of an alchemist's, blue and white with a gold insignia over the hood.

"Wait till I show the queen you," she murmured. "She'll be so proud. You're going to do amazing things, my love. You're going to grow up so fast. You'll hardly be this small tomorrow. Your existence is a blessing. Our salvation."

One of the Alteans stepped forwards, wearing something akin to a lab coat. "Fala, does this mean we carry on with the rest of the project?"

Fala readjusted the Lion in her arms, Black's hind leg strewn over her elbow and pawing at nothing playfully. "Of course. She'll need her sisters, won't she?"

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"You've outdone yourself, sister," Queen Melenor praised, overlooking Fala's observatory. Two large, black shelled pods were still in the incubator, basked in a warm yellow and blue glow. Melenor's golden markings spiralled like juniberry petals around her eyes, gleaming with triumph, as she turned to where the Black Lion was wrestling with Red over in another wide, walled section. "You say it's grown this big in only three weeks?"

"The Black Lion, yes." Fala's face glowed with pride. "Already twice as big as a Galra fighter. Red will catch up soon, she'll never be quite as big. Black got the most quintessence, to ensure her survival in the process... Yellow is still small. She's in a room of her own for now, Red is a bit too brash. Black already knows well enough not to squish the others."

"When will they be ready for battle?" the Queen asked. "Our western flank needs defense. Galra reinforcements will be hailing down on it any day."

Fala smiled. "You asked me to build you a weapon to win this war. I can assure you, I've built you the greatest war machine in the galaxy."

Melenor arched an eyebrow, amused, her gaze having drifted over to the Yellow Lion's hangar. "One that's currently playing with yarn?"

"She's playing with titanium steel," Fala corrected, brimming with pride. "It was a solid block when brought to it. She's cut it into strands herself."

Fala watched as her sister re-evaluated her, and Melenor nodded her approval. "Win this war, we might yet, then."

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"Paladins, sister, really?"

Fala paced the circular room of her sister's study, Altea's twin moons set low over the horizon. It
would be second night soon. "The Lions cannot exist as they are. They need something to channel their quintessence through, and they cannot give that to each other. Souls, living Altean souls, are the best things for them. Something to fixate on."

"Souls?" Melenor repeated. "What do souls have to do with science?"

"I have used unspeakably ancient alchemy to bring the Lions into this physical world," Fala said sharply. "Alchemy that others scoffed at as mere magic. And yet I, I achieved it, alone, through sacrifice. The Lions need something to bind them to truly living things, not merely as sentiment beings." Fala looked out the window. Her hair was longer, greyer, yet Melenor, while stressed, appeared to be only a month or so older than their day in the observatory. "Do you not worship the old gods still? Celeste and Luna, the goddesses constantly at war with the sun? Did they not bind themselves to our moons, to control the tides and guide the stars? To guide us?"

Melenor rose from her desk, and approached her sister, her brow furrowed. "I understand your concern. And you have done well, truly. If you think Paladins are the solution in allowing the Lions to properly aid us, then... But my sister," she placed a careful hand on Fala's shoulder, "you are the greatest alchemist I have ever seen, but even you cannot create gods. And... I am also worried for your creation."

Fala softened, and turned back towards her. "How so?"

"Is it smart, to the connect as powerful as the Lions to something so mortal as an Altean soul? What if when their paladin dies, they do as well?"

Fala pursed her lips. "Science does not tell of unforeseen endeavours. Please, sister. Trust me."

Melenor squeezed her shoulder, and then let go. "I will trust whatever you think is best."

Fala smiled. "Thank you. And... select the finest of your guard. They can be the first presented to the Lions as candidates."

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"Melenor!"

Fala rushed into the hangar as the Blue Lion's maw opened, and the Paladin emerged holding the injured queen in his arms; Melenor had taken into leading the paladins into battle, for the months since their choosing. With their prowess and her strategic skill, it wouldn't be long before she saw the end of the war.

If she would just open her eyes and stop bleeding, that was. Fala's hands fumbled with the buckles of her sister's armour, before she wrenched off the shoulder pad and breast plate; dark red was spreading fast. "No—no—" Fala's hands glowed as she murmured under her breath, tears in her eyes, and the wound slowly began to close, the blood turning stale, even as her chest remained shallow. "Melenor? Melenor open your eyes—Mellie open your eyes—"

The queen's chest rose and fell with breath, her eyes bleary as they opened, and Fala brought her into a tearful embrace. "Thank the Ancients," Fala gasped.

Melenor smiled weakly, blood smeared at the corner of her mouth. "Your Lion saved me. I suppose your creation really did come in handy, sister."

Fala looked up, and helped pass Melenor along to her ladies in waiting, their faces anxious. Black's eyes brimmed. "Thank you," Fala whispered, "my ebony."
Repair maintenances on the Lions was going well, all five lined up in the Black Lion's hangar, and Melenor hated she knew it was exactly where her sister would be, as she entered the hangar flanked by her guards. Fala was rubbing the Blue Lion's nose affectionately with a rag, a few of her workers double checking the other Lions' paws, when the alchemist turned to face the queen as she strode past the doorway.

Melenor's face was wretched. "Sister, please tell me you didn't do this."

Fala set aside the rag, cautious creases forming her brow. "What do you mean?"

"I checked Derizul's prisons this morning. I saw his records, the forged inventory papers. You two made a deal and kept the extra godl being funnelled into the prison: too many resources for too few prisoners there. There were hundreds, hundreds of Galra there." Melenor's throat tightened. "Fala, what did you do with them?"

Fala narrowed her eyes. "I said that the Lions required sacrifice, sister. They were Galra prisoners. I told you I used ancient alchemy. What did you expect—"

"And certain ancient alchemy is forbidden for a reason!" Melenor's chest heaved.

This could not be happening. It couldn't have happened. But she'd seen the records, the video feeds. Galra thrashing in warped cryopods, body parts being discarded, the black pods the Lions had been hatched from, the all too birthlike slime surrounding them finally explained.

"You drained them," Melenor hissed, "you used them! You're a murderer! Do you realize what you've done! You have soiled any chance our peoples had for peace as an end to this loathsome war!"

"You told me to build you a weapon to end this war! Who ever spoke of peace?!" Fala demanded.

Melenor's voice was tight, her eyes shining like stone. "Guards. Arrest Fala Morigin, for crimes of blood magic, and inhumane treatment of war prisoners and—" Her voice wavered. "For secrecy and thereby treason against the crown, under the state of law of Altea."

The guards hesitated for a moment, before her captain, Krell, urged the others forwards before they shackled Fala and the rest of her workers, who would be interrogated for information and possible complicity. Melenor's eyes stung as the guards dragged Fala out of the room, and her baby sister glared at her on the way out.

"My queen," Krell said quietly. "You know under the law she will have to be executed for her crimes."

Melenor swallowed hard. "I know."

Krell stepped closer. "Milady, please forgive me if I am overstepping but —what will you do?"

Her jaw was set. "I will do what I must."

"You have a day to get off the planet."

Fala didn't look up, as her sister remained facing the doorway of the stone corridor, even as her cell
The door swung open. "How merciful," Fala spat. "It is," said Melenor, her voice shaking, "considering I should be having you executed in the morning, alongside the rest of your cursed followers."

Fala stood up, and stepped out of her cell, watching as Melenor's most trusted advisors—the few she could trust with such a secret—undid her shackles. "Is this your idea of keeping your promise to mother and father?" Fala sneered. "Of protecting me?"

Melenor refused to flinch. "I am. From yourself." She turned stiffly from the door, as Fala's twelve or so other disciples, those who had been charged, were released as well. "There is a ship with supplies waiting for you. You will be escorted there, and you will leave Altea, and never come back, or you will be killed on sight. Your Lions will stay here as compensation." The disciples, Alteans in robes of royal colours (blue, white, gold) with their heads bent, and most with long hair, filed out first. Melenor grabbed her sister's arm when she went to pass, her eyes pleading, one last time. "Do not make me regret this, Fala."

The alchemist jerked her arm out of Melenor's grip. "I trust you already have, sister," she hissed.

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Sparse, distant memories: disgruntled Galra signing a peace treaty with the Lions looming tall. Lions mourning their first paladins. Melenor's death. Lions choosing their second, their third. Centuries, millennia, flew by. What was even an Altean's life span to something like a Lion of Voltron, of what had become known as a Legendary Defender?

"Legendary indeed," Queen Ilura snorted, striding past the dusty hangars ten thousand years later. Princess Amara tripped to keep up with her.

"I know we have not been at war in centuries," Amara said, purple hair flying behind her. Her markings were simple and small, pink like her sister's, although Ilura's hair was a darker purple. "And that we have no need of them—but sister, I swear to you, I have heard them calling for me. Every time I pass by the Red Lion's hangar I feel a rush of quintessence like I've never felt before —"

Ilura scoffed, her crown glinting. "You think you'll be its paladin?"

Amara puffed out her chest importantly. "I don't see why not!"

"Princesses do not become paladins," Ilura admonished. "You should be focusing on your studies. You're only 140 feebs old. You still have much to learn if you're to be queen one day."

"I'm not going to be queen," she pouted. "It's boring. And you're a great queen, and nothing's happening to you. I'm just a spare heir and everyone knows it."

"Amara." Ilura turned around and took her younger sister by the shoulders. "You are not a spare anything, do you understand? Mother and father would be so proud of the young woman you're becoming, but... a paladin is not what it is. Think logically, Amara. The Lions have not summoned paladins for eons. Why would they suddenly do so now?"

Amara did her best not to soften. "They might've earlier, if we hadn't closed the Galra off from presenting themselves as paladins ever since they were created."

Ilura rose and sighed. "You would do well to learn how to hold your tongue, and be careful of who you speak of such things in front of, Amara. There are rules we follow for a reason."
"They aren't just."

"That is not for you to decide."

"Don't you want to be the best queen Altea has ever seen?"

"I don't need to be the best," Ilura said. "Merely good. One day when you're older, you'll understand."

"More like one day when I'm older," Amara grumbled, "I'll change your mind."

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"Zarkon, slow down!"

Amara laughed as she bypassed the Yellow Lion, quickly catching up to Black. She'd turned too sharply a few rounds back, and had been gaining ground ever since; Red was good at that. "You'll have to do better than that, Aurydice!" she said gleefully, and heard Alfor grumble in response; he was always a sore loser.

It was with a final flourish she capped off the race as number one, Zarkon close behind, with Zindi in third and Sarli outstreaking Alfor in Blue by a mile.

"It's a good thing we have at least one competent Altean on our team," said Zindi, laughing as she disembarked from the Green Lion, a helmet tucked under one arm and her braid a tight coil down her back.

Alfor brought the Yellow Lion to a halt, and climbed out of the Lion's maw to where the rest were standing, Amara bumping shoulders with Zarkon. He seemed to be swallowing his pride, or maybe embarrassment; those were the only reasons she could think of, for his cheeks to be pink.

"Congratulations on your win, Amara," he said, and she grinned. Perhaps he wasn't that much of a sore loser after all.

"Well," she slung her arm around Sarli's shoulders, and rose in size to not drag them down, "we have to keep these three Galra in check, don't we?"

Zarkon flicked her in the back of the head, his face smooth and his armour simple but refined: a symbol of his status. "You would do well to respect your commanding officer, Princess," he said, nearly stone faced, a smile poking out at his mouth despite himself.

"You want to lead the way back to the castle then, Prince Zarkon? Or should we walk? The terrain is simple enough."

"Our Lions might need a tick to rest," Zindi said, "after all the drills we've done today, I'm pretty tired too."

"Tired?" Amara repeated incredulously. "We've hardly done anything. Don't you want adventure? A real mission? Ilura will have to stop putting us on standby soon enough."

Zarkon placed a hand on her shoulder. "Be careful what you wish for, Amara. Not everyone is as bold and brave as you and your Lion."

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"Your sister is dead. Bandits at the Olkarion outpost got her... It seems like an assassination
attempt,” Raible reported, twisting his grey mustache. "Princess, I am... so sorry."

Amara stumbled back, and the rest of her House—Morigins, some by blood and some by class and name only, but still family—those not blanched by grief, rushed to support her. Honvera caught her around the waist, dark circles under her eyes. She’d been roused from her laboratory. Vaguely, Amara knew it was hard to tear her away from it. “My—my sister—?”

"They think perhaps the Dark Mages got her. The body has been retrieved and given the proper rites for burial. How long of a mourning period do you want in between her funeral and your coronation? A quintant?"

She couldn't find her voice. She couldn't breathe. "R-Raible," she finally forced out. "Where is your grandson? And Alfor?" Her fellow paladin hardly went anywhere without his advisor, and he’d been assigned to accompany her sister as bodyguards. She didn't think she could bear it if she lost him too. Or Coran; strange as he was, she was fond of him all the same. And she had to cling to something, something alive that wasn't collapsing around her.

Raible gave her an incredibly sad smile. "Preparing for banishment, I expect. He fears as though he's failed."

"Well tell him to stop because he’s sticking around," Amara said roughly. It was still hard to breathe. "I'll... if everyone could leave me to my thoughts, I would appreciate it greatly."

The twin moons outside her window had only changed perhaps a varga's pace when her earrings buzzed, and she reached to turn them off when Transmission from Emperor Zarkon came through, and drew it up.

"I'm so sorry about Ilura,” he said. "I —my Lion told me. We can all feel your distress."

Amara walked shakily to her desk, and gripped the back of her chair to support herself. "I appreciate your sentiments Zarkon," she managed, "but... I need to be alone right now."

Red hummed, from somewhere in her hangar. It was the only thing that made her feel less alone.

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"Tell me you wouldn't have done the same if it was Amara, Alfor!” Zarkon roared. The Black Lion's eyes gleamed behind him.

"I never said I wouldn't!” A flush rose to Alfor's cheeks. "But you put your people at risk! We had to destroy Daibazaal, and now your people are crowded onto two planets instead of three! Does that mean nothing to you?!”

"Honerva is alive, isn't she? Does that mean nothing to you? Does our unborn child mean nothing to you?"

"Amara never should have gone into the Rift pregnant either! If our child dies, it is on your head!"

"And if my wife dies because you refused to treat her, that is on yours!"

"Blood magic is forbidden for a reason, Zarkon! Honerva's family knows that better than anyone, with the ancestry she has! She's been a part of her family for years, you think I wanted to see her die? I wanted—" Alfor deflated, a hollowness where the anger had been. "Ancients, I can't believe we're alive." He slowly looked up at Zarkon, who softened slightly. "Just promise me, one thing: as long as you live, that Rift will remain closed. Please. So that we didn't lose your home world for
Zarkon remained frowning, but his shoulders eased. "I swear."

"Thank you, old friend."

"Thank you again, Honerva." Alfor led the way onto the castleship's bridge, a hand on Allura's shoulder. "It's about time she began to learn, and I know you don't travel to Altea often these days."

"Zarkon and I are quite busy."

"He knows he was invited as well?"

Honerva's face soured. "Yes, but... he was unable to get away from work." She glanced at Allura, who looked to be around eleven earthling years old, and wearing her mother's circlet.

"I understand," Alfor said. "I would teach Allura how to pilot the castleship myself, but I'm afraid I don't have the time either. Still, it is always good to see an old friend, and tell Zarkon to come visit soon, if he could?" He smiled down at his daughter. "If only because his goddaughter misses him. She still wears the Galra helmet given to her as a baby, you know."

"Yes." Honerva gave him a thin lipped smile. "Merla finds it quite... amusing."

Alfor tried to keep on smiling. "Ah, well I can... certainly see why," he managed cheerily, and they stopped at the bridge's steering controls. They glowed as Honerva lowered them closer to Allura's gangly yet short height. "You'll be alright here with Aunt Honerva, won't you juniberry?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes father."

Alfor kissed the top of her head before straightening up. "Just do what Aunt Honerva tells you." He turned to the alchemist. "You have the controls set to practice mode?"

"Of course," she said, inclining her head. "I would never let anything happen to the castle, nor Allura."

Alfor gave them one last smile before she and Allura watched the king leave, together. Honerva turned away first.

"—Father, you know what I'm capable of, we must form Voltron and fight before it's too late!"

"It's already too late. We must send the lions away. We can't risk them falling into Zarkon's hands. The Black Lion is already here." Red lights flashed around them, and blue collapsed in the distance. Red may already have been taken from him, but Alfor could still feel the hum of the Black Lion, resisting Zarkon's call, thank the Ancients. He should have seen this coming. He should have seen his friend turning into what he was; genocide and war did happen overnight, after all. "We must get it, and you, to safety, my daughter."

"We can't give up hope!"

He looked over Allura's shoulder, and met Coran's eyes. He knew his advisor, his oldest friend, would do whatever he required of him, and he knew he was asking for no small thing: to return him to Altea in a pod, after sealing the universe's greatest weapon away, for one last great stand at
saving Altea.

He turned his gaze back to his daughter; the last remnant of his Amara. He imagined the verbal lashing he'd get, if he joined his wife too soon in the afterlife, and would have smiled if the situation and the way Allura was looking at him with her eyes wasn't so grim.

"I'm sorry, daughter. If all goes well, I will see you again soon."

"Father!"

"I love you."

Alfor waved his hand, and Allura closed her eyes.

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And then she opened them.

Reeling, she stumbled back into Shiro, who barely managed to catch her in time. Suddenly, all the stories she heard all of her life. The missing sister of the queen, scrubbed from nearly every historical text. The legend of the Dark Mages, who she now knew must have been Haggar's druids. And her godparents' betrayal of her family, of her people, built steadily since the divergence of the Rift. The memories shared with the Black Lion over the years, both from the Alteans who'd known her, and from her paladins. Her marks glowed against her eyelids as she shut her eyes again, her head aching.

"Blood magic," she choked out finally. Shiro helped her onto the ground, his hands over her shaking shoulders. "My family's legacy is blood magic."

He shook his head. "Allura, no—"

"No wonder Zarkon's connection to the Black Lion is so strong—it's his people's quintessence running through it—"

"Allura." Shiro's eyes were trembling, but his mouth was steady, as he pulled her back onto her feet. "If I told you everything humans have done to each other, with much less long lasting changes than the greatest defender the universe has ever known, you would be horrified. All peoples are flawed."

But now it was her time to shake her head. "Don't you see, Shiro? It was never a defender. That was just a legend. And it spent all that time making up for its sins—"

"And if Zarkon's connection has lasted this long, then what chance do I have of breaking it?"

That snapped her out of it. "No. It simply means that you are untainted, Shiro." She took his hand, and looked back at his Lion. Sadness shifted on her face. "You and the other paladins... you are Earthlings. You can redefine Voltron's legacy for good, succeed where my parents failed. But first, you must win the Black Lion from Zarkon. And if so much magic was involved in Voltron's creation..."

She stepped away, letting go of his hand, and turning her own over, as she turned the idea over in her mind. "We will need more than the physical realm to do so. Come with me."

Chapter End Notes
yes, the rift and the fall of altea happen years apart, because as alfor says: waging war and genocide on anyone, much less a longtime ally by that point, does not contrary to what canon vld wants us to believe, happen over night. hence allura growing up post-rift and all that it entailed, but more on that later.
Chapter Summary

Shiro fights, Coran broods, and Allura harvests scaultrite. Startling discoveries are made.

Chapter Notes

new arc, which is exciting! and only three more chapters until the season finale chapter, and then we're onto fan season three. get ready for even more canon divergence from here on out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC III: Holts and Hopes

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: The Belly of the Beast

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"Allura, wait!"

Shiro hurried after her in the hallway, and realized belatedly when she slowed enough for him to catch up that they were headed towards the castleship library. It was a room he'd only been to twice, once in the tour Allura had given him, the second in his own further exploration of the castle one sleepless night. He caught her wrist and wheeled her back towards him.

"Allura, slow down. What's going on? Some of what we saw made sense to me, but—" He swallowed. "Kolivan told me if I knew what your family had done I wouldn't have sworn fealty to you—and while that's not true," he added quickly, "I could really use an explanation about some of it, like the war, and... our war."

Allura breathed, her face resigned but soft. "I'll be able to explain better in the library." She slipped her wrist out of his grasp, and gave his hand a quick squeeze. "Come."

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"Is this really what you humans do all day?" Lira asked, looking around their lounge. Lance was sprawled over one couch, Keith leaning against the wall, Pidge immersed in their tech, and Hunk smiling as brightly as he could. The galra girl remained standing, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Well, it's what we do," Hunk said. "Humans back home do different stuff. Work, go to malls, shopping, that sort of thing."

"Malls?" she repeated. "Like a marketplace? Or a black market?"

"You know," Lance lifted his arms. They'd switched back into their civilian clothes after eating. "For things like jackets."
At this, Lira looked bewildered. "Jackets? You mean cloaks with sleeves? How strange. And you... Earthers, all wear them?"

"Well yeah," said Keith, unfolding one arm from across his chest. "We get cold."

Lira's face scrunched up. "I spent most of my time working with my uncle as an engineer in heats that would have killed us without our heat and radioactive resistant suits. Cold is not a familiar fear to me, not that much is. How have you earthlings survived space for so long?"

"Dumb luck?" Lance offered.

Lira tilted her head, and then nodded. "As fine an answer as any. I suppose. How did you become paladins? My uncle said your planet was very far away. He wasn't sure freeing the Champion would go successfully, as you had no previous knowledge of life outside your galaxy?"

Lance opened his mouth, but Keith clamped a hand over his mouth. "We'll tell you if you tell us how you became a Blade," he bargained. Lance shoved Keith away.

She scowled at both of them. "We don't share with outsiders."

Keith sighed. "I'm not an outsider now exactly though, am I?" he said snappishly. "I passed your trials. I have one of your blades. I have Blade and Galran lineage."

Lira lifted an eyebrow. "You destroyed our base," she said, and Keith had the decency to shrink back a tad sheepishly, "and while you may have lineage, that means nothing unless you know which House you hail from."

"House?" Pidge asked. "Like, your family?"

"Closer to a clan, but yes." This was one thing Lira seemed willing to divulge. "There's those of your immediate House, your home if you will: your parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and the rest. Then there is your extended House, those who married or were adopted in for one reason or another, or have been distantly related to you for a very long time." Her eyes dimmed, and she turned away towards the door. "Is there a place one can fight or spar here? Do humans have those things?"

"We have a training deck," Hunk said. "Give you a bit of a tour of the castle. I could show you if you like?"

"Yeah," said Lance, leaping up beside him. Clearly he didn't want Hunk to be alone with a practical stranger, as much as he'd been in favour of allying with the Blades, and the quick smile Hunk flashed him shone with gratitude. "I've been meaning to get some sparring practice in. Come on, you can show me what you got?"

Pidge nudged Keith. "You wanna come see Lance get his butt kicked?"

The Red Paladin smiled thinly. "I suppose so."

"Hey, I'm going to do a great job," Lance said, as the four paladins and one Marmora member left the lounge.

"I believe in you Lance," Hunk said.

"Yes, exactly, thank you—"

Lira glanced back at them, Hunk walking by her side. There was a slight smile on her face. "You are
a very strange family," she said.

Lance softened. "Yeah. I guess we are."

Shiro was impressed that the castle's library even had books, old thick dusty tomes that Allura bypassed for sleeker holocoms and screens, some tucked next to books and stamped with what seemed to be minuscule numbers along the blue edges; corresponding numbers, and preservation of the information in those books, perhaps? He'd have to spend more time here in the future.

"Here it is," Allura declared, taking both a book and a holopad, and guiding him over to the closest table, two chairs on either side. They both took a seat. "A record of the Dark Mages' experiments—you'll know them simply as the druids now, but that wasn't always the case—some speculation on remnants of Purification, and the first information recorded of Lion-Paladin bonds."

"I still don't think I quite understand how Altean magic, or alchemy, works," Shiro said rather apologetically.

The whirring gears in Allura's head came to a halt, but she gave him an easy smile all the same. "Of course, I'm sorry," she laid a hand on his arm, "I understand how it would be confusing from a non-Altean perspective. You do not have magic back on Earth?"

"In stories," he confirmed. "But not real magic. We did have something called alchemy, but that was more about chemicals and metalworking and philosophy than anything else. The search for immortal life."

"Ah, well there are some similarities," Allura said. "Immortality is a component of Altean alchemy and sorcery, but likely as unsuccessful as Earth's in actually recreating it?" At his tiny nod, the princess continued. "The distinction between alchemy and sorcery is what each is used for and focused on. Alchemy is in scientific pursuits, using our magic to create new inventions, specifically for technology, and typically employed by a patron who funds their research. Sorcery is more for every day work, such as heating a meal back up again, but also for direct healing and warfare, that sort of thing. What I mean is, every Alchemist is a sorcerer, but not every sorcerer is an alchemist. Does that make sense?"

Shiro gave her another nod.

"Wonderful. Now, sorcery in Altean is divided into two main sects. There are mages, who practice defensive magic: healing, mostly, and reconstruction of buildings or something like a broken statue. Peaceful, in nature. One of our most famous mages was also an alchemist who invented the particle barrier. Meanwhile, druids were trained in offensive, combative magic, as soldiers, knights, bodyguards—as well as Paladins of Voltron, although they would typically be trained in both. Fala Morigin likely used someone trained as a druid to help her construct the team's bayards."

"But how did she make the Lions exactly? I know she took Galran quintessence, but to create something sentient and ancient, like the Lions—?"

"Quintessence is the energy of everything in the galaxy. It's the thread that binds us, how we're all made of the same cosmic space dust, so to speak, that is being recycled over and over again, each time taking a new form that will never be replicated again. It is the thread that connects each part of the universe, or other dimensions, to us. Therefore, it stands that there is a limited amount of quintessence in the dimension we exist in." The excitement in her eyes, of sharing her culture, her world, faded. "Haggar pushed it too far. She started trying to tear open a rift on one of the Galra
home planets, Daibazaal, to get to one of the thread lines of quintessence and have an unlimited amount."

"That was the Rift? Before you were born?"

"Yes. The Rift was a quintessence field, torn open by the Lions. Haggar's research had speculated of its existence, but when she fell ill while pregnant, it was her last hope of recovery. My father refused to let blood magic be performed to save her life; it had been forbidden since Queen Melenor's time, and for good reason."

Shiro studied the table, trying to process everything. "And then what happened?"

"After the Rift, Haggar and Zarkon began to plot against our family. Zarkon insisted the Galrans needed time to recover, to transition of only having two planets instead of three, as Daibazaal, his home planet, had to be destroyed to close the Rift properly. They separated from Altean trade, visited less often..." Allura's lips thinned. "Kept up the facade of being loving godparents to me, when they did. My parents hoped that by having them as my godparents, it would work to heal the gap between all of them, and in turn, Zarkon and Haggar chose my parents to be the godparents of their firstborn child. It was all a ruse. When Altea's last day came, we had already been at war for some months."

She looked back at Shiro, who met her gaze. Something in it told her he understood all too well. "Genocide does not happen overnight, after all. Hatred does not come immediately. It must be built, rewarded. It started with the implement of Galran laws that half-Altean Galra were to be looked down upon—Zarkon's own children the exception, of course—and for other half-Galra to be lifted above them. Altean magic was rejected, except for druids who would become Haggar's, and they conducted experiments that have been banned in Altea. But as a child, I... did not know any better."

A lump formed in her throat. "I loved them, and I thought they loved me, and my planet burned for it..."

Shiro laid a hand on her shoulder. "I am so, so sorry, princess."

Allura wiped at her eyes. "I just hope one day, when the galaxy is free of them, I can be as well," she whispered.

He drew her into his side, and Allura leaned against him. He waited a few long ticks, before he said softly, "Haggar mentioned someone. A nanny?"

A faint smile curved her lips as she looked at him. "For the record, Coran was the closest thing I ever had to a nanny."

Their noses were nearly touching, as he gave her an easy grin, a welcome and brief reprieve to the heaviness plaguing them both. "My apologies, princess. So, who was Merla then?"

She turned away. "Princess Merla was Haggar and Zarkon's firstborn. She was always a sickly thing—Haggar's womb was damaged even before she went into the Rift. The subsequent illness and trauma... it was lucky my own mother escaped unscathed with me, but we never knew quite what plagued her. On the rare occasions she came to Altea, we played together as children." Allura's face twisted before it fell. "Given her illnesses, I doubt she survived the past 10,000 years."

Shiro paused. "Was she..." It wasn't the right word, but it was all he could think of. "Good?"

"Somewhat," Allura conceded. "She was also very bitter. I think she felt trapped by the weight of her bloodline, of the crown. I understood all too well." Her eyes dimmed. "What I wouldn't give to have it all back now."
"We don't have to talk anymore today," Shiro said softly. "I think we've both seen enough—"

"No," Allura pulled away from him. "I haven't told you yet of how to break Zarkon's connection to your Lion. It is a process only spoken of in ancient texts."

She opened up the book, consulted her datapad once, before flipping more than halfway through, the pages yellowed with age but also illuminated with a soft blue glow, as though to keep them preserved, like a tiny translucent cryopod for each page.

"The Lions are not of this realm," she read aloud, "but pure quintessence made sentient through blood magic and the Altean mortality of their paladins, and the status of paladin passes from one bayard wielder to the next..." Her eyes scanned the page. "—however, in the case of two paladins being chosen by one Lion, they must prove their worth in a celestial realm contained in the power core of each Lion, only reached through either trust or invasion, often in a duel to a spiritual death, and the champion will secure their unquestioned bond with the Lion, even in cases of deep corruption."

Shiro spoke slowly, to make sure he was connecting all the pieces properly. "So I need to go to this realm that my Lion can bring me into, and duel whatever thing I find of Zarkon there?"

"That seems to be the gist, yes. As the book states, such a happening is very rare."

Shiro swallowed. "And if I lose?"

Allura laid a hand on his arm. Her eyes shone with willful sincerity. "You won't lose."

The corner of his mouth lifted, even as the rest of him remained unconvinced. "But if I do?"

She looked away, frowning. "I don't know. The book does not say. It was such a rare occurrence, and... there are no records of a statement from a losing participant. It does clarify that it is a spiritual death, so I would suppose... perhaps, if you lose, your connection to the Black Lion will be lost forever, never to be reclaimed."

"I see." Shiro rose. "No time to find out like the present, then."

Allura shot up after him. "No," she said firmly. "You've hardly rested in the past few days, since the attack on Olkarion, and healing in a cryopod doesn't count. You'll need all your strength to face Zarkon. You should rest and face him in the morning."

Shiro opened his mouth as though to argue, and then shut it. "Yes, princess..." His brow furrowed. "May I ask you something?" She gestured with her hands to go ahead, although oddly enough, she seemed very still. "You had to help me connect to my Lion for the transfer of memories. Is there any other role you have to play, to get me to the realm, or to help me there?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid there is nothing further I can do. It will have to be a battle you face on your own."

"Good."

She looked up at him in surprise, a soft smile on his face. "What do you mean?"

His smile flickered. "If Zarkon hurt you again because of me, I wouldn't be able to live with myself." He kicked his grin back into gear, even if it remained feeble. "Besides, I don't think I could bear losing you and Black in the same day."
Her throat tightened as their eyes met, and a sharp, acute realization swept over her. That if she had to choose between him or the Black Lion, she'd choose him. "Shiro, I—"

They leapt apart as Lance's voice broke out loudly over the palace intercomms. "—Lira, wait no, don't touch that—" His voice pitched upwards as he realized he was on air. "Uh, hey guys, I mean, Coran, Shiro, and Allura, we were just giving Lira a tour of the castle really and we're uh, done now, so—"

The comm crackled silent, and Shiro and Allura glanced uncertainly at each other before they burst out laughing. Allura sobered more quickly. "I suppose I should go corral them," she said.

"And I should go rest," he reaffirmed. Allura knew she should have stepped away, but she hovered, as Shiro stayed thoughtfully quiet, before he finally broke the silence. "I promise I'll do whatever I can to get justice for you and your family, princess."

Her smile softened. "I know. But thank you." She stepped closer and shooed him away, and he smiled at her fondly in a way that made her chest feel warm. "Now go. You'll have a long day ahead of you."

"Have a good night as well, princess," he said as he left, and Allura let herself linger for a moment further before she headed towards the bridge to call the paladins to.

Her day was far from over.

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"Tell me," Allura said, the four paladins and Lira lined up in front of her on the bridge, all but the former looking at least a little sheepish; clearly they were expecting a scolding, "what can we do going forward to earn back the Blade of Marmora's trust?" She fixed her eyes on Lira.

"You mentioned they would need resources to build a new base. What exactly would that entail?"

Lira shifted from foot to foot, as though weighing her options. "Scaultrite," she said mostly. "From the belly of a weblum."

"Scaultrite," Allura repeated. From what she remembered of the creatures, weblums were large and aggressive, and best left to their own devices. Scaultrite had been a rare commodity, expensive on all markets, and its unique property of quintessence was what had made it so popular among the Galra trading vessels her father had taken her on as a child.

"We hook it up to a generator that recreates the weblum's recycling of destroyed planets, but recreate quintessence instead," Lira explained. "It needs a bit tending to every once and a while, and some added quintessence, but in general it's an unlimited supply. It helps us create the pockets of space time we build our bases in."

"Would you be able to open a channel of communication with one of the head Blades?" Allura asked. "For negotiation?"

"They're under Red Protocol right now," Lira said. "Communication is banned for another quintant, at least."

Allura considered. The longer they waited, the more the destruction of their base could be resented for. And if they found some disparate members of the Blades, and helped them organize themselves back together, it would be even easier to integrate Voltron among them.
"We can’t wait that long," she decided. "I’ll speak with Coran and we’ll set about finding the nearest weblum. He and I can secure the scaultrite. The rest of you will stay here and look after the Castle."

"What about Shiro?" Keith asked. It was the first time he’d spoken to her directly since she’d lectured him, and Allura softened slightly despite herself.

"He has his own matters to attend to," she said, and when Keith scowled she grew more stern. "Which none of you will interrupt him from. Keep yourselves occupied. I’ll go fetch Coran.”

Lance’s eyes slid from her as she left to Lira. “We never did get to the training deck. Looks like hothead here could blow off some steam.”

“I’m not a hot head,” Keith grumbled, but followed them back to the training deck alongside Pidge and Hunk. Why’d they have to take that dumb detour by the castle’s database room earlier anyway?

Fifteen ticks later, Keith groaned as he landed hard on the deck of the training room, Lira looming over him as she lowered her Blade. His own Bayard changed from a sword to its original form.

“You fight like a Galra soldier,” she sneered, “but not like a Blade.” Still, she stowed away her knife and offered a hand to haul Keith to his feet. He took it with only minimal muttering as she eyed him in interest. “How much Galra even are you? Which caste did your parents hail from?”

“I don’t know,” Keith gritted out.

“Caste?” Hunk asked.

This didn’t seem to be information Lira was reluctant to divulge. “Before the war began, there were three Galra homeplanets: Daibazaal, Zadai, and Gazaal. Daibazaal was destroyed by the Alteans and Voltron, and the highest caste, Tzarak . Then there are the Yurak s, from Zadai, second in the hierarchy. Then there is my caste, the Kyrak s, of Gazaal, at the bottom. It was always the most multicultural, with a great deal of half-breeds. That being said,” she puffed her chest out with some pride, “I am full Galra, and can trace the ancestry of the House of Astero back millennia.” Lira’s face fell. “Not that it matters much. With my Uncle gone, I am the last of my House.”

Lance’s eyes widened. “You’re an orphan?”

Lira glared at him. “It makes me a better fighter. The empire cannot intimidate me. There is no one left that I love for them to hurt.”

“I didn’t mean—” Lance floundered, but Keith came to his rescue.

“It’s just that I’m an orphan too,” he said. “Or at least I thought I was, until…” he looked at his Blade. “Now I don’t know.”

“Is that why you came to the Blade so unprepared?” she asked. “You wanted to find your mother?”

Keith slowly nodded, and Lira swore under her breath. “For Dylak’s sake…” She took out her blade and thrust it at him. “Every Blade has an encryption code planted in their blade, for tracking and identification purposes. So while we won’t be able to find your mother with it, we may be able to at least find her name. If we can crack the code. I wasn’t trained in hacking, but—”

“I can do it,” Pidge said, and they shared a smile with Keith. “If there’s one thing I’m an expert in, it’s hacking into things to find family members. I have my equipment in my Lion’s hangar.” They grinned wickedly. “Let’s go.”
All Lira could do was trail after the four teenagers as she muttered, “Strangest defenders of the universe I’ve ever seen.”

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Coran was twisting his mustache between two fingers he made his way to the mainframe database of the Castleship. He’d gone to a webrum with Alfor once, before his friend’s paladin days, as young and adventurous rogues exploring the galaxy in between the trading posts Alfor had been assigned to oversee. They’d sat in the backseats of their ship, the cargo hold crammed full of sealed scaultrite, still somewhat warm from the beast’s belly, and they laughed and talked as Alfor readied the wormhole. There’d been a moment, before the wormhole had opened, with the soft look in Alfor’s eyes, and the slight way he leaned in, that Coran had thought—

Alfor had been chosen as a paladin and met Amara soon afterwards, and Coran had never seen him so quickly smitten with someone. Zarkon had been the one to finally nudge the two together. It was a terrible thought, one Coran had turned over and tossed out more than he could count in the tense years leading up to Zarkon’s betrayal, of whether Zarkon had done it on purpose, to distract the two Alteans on the team with marriage and love and happiness.

Coran refused to let Allura die the rest of her family had, alone and felled by other people’s hatred. Ilura, assassinated. Amara, sick and poisoned. (The healers hadn’t ruled it as an assassination at the time, but who could be certain of anything, now?) Alfor, slain on Altea and left to burn with the rest of the their planet. Coran still wasn’t sure if he was grateful he hadn’t seen his oldest friend die or not. He doubted he would ever be sure.

He could still remember the last time he’d taken this walk to the castle’s mainframe, before sealing himself away in a cryopod, Allura already sleeping. The castle had creaked, and even though they had wormholed light years away after he’d sent Alfor back to Altea in a pod—a final embrace, Alfor’s cape slipping through his fingers as the king stepped away—Coran could still the explosion, a dot of violent orange amid the darkness of space.

He’d contemplated, in front of the database he was standing before now, after he’d typed in the coordinates for Arus and knew the castle’s autopilot would get them there safely, just letting himself stand there and die. Starve. Everything he’d loved, the family he’d built for himself, his friend, his king, his sister, was gone. But then he’d thought of the princess waking up alone, and he knew he couldn’t.

Allura had pulled him back from the abyss. She always had.

Sometimes he resented Alfor, for abandoning his daughter the way he had. But Coran also knew Alfor had gone to die on Altea for Allura, for the hope that one day the princess would reawaken and survive, and free the universe, that Alfor could make that task just a little bit easier through his sacrifices.

And Allura would, Coran knew. She had her mother’s will and courage, her father’s compassion and patience (when it counted). He liked to think she had a little of him too: his resourcefulness, or playfulness. But he hadn’t expected it would be like this. With the Galra as allies, of all people. And now to know they’d had one among their midst this whole time, one in Amara’s armour—and Keith had always been unusually quiet, distant with everyone but Shiro, who had also been in Galra captivity, and—

Coran was broken from what he knew was a vicious line of thought by the sound of voices halfway on his way back from the mainframe room with the webrum’s coordinates. The noise was coming from the Green Lion’s hangar, and he paused in the doorway. Pidge, Keith, Hunk, Lance, and the
Blade of Marmora member—what had her name been again? Lira?—crowded around Pidge’s monitor. They had a Blade out and some of the panels split open, wires connecting to the monitor, and Pidge typing quickly.

Coran was disgruntled as he strode into the room. “What the quiznak is going on here?”

“Oh, hi Coran.” Pidge gave him a sunny smile. They always delighted in exploring alien tech. “We’re using Keith’s Blade to look for his mom, or whoever it belonged to. It has an identification chip, you see—” They pointed out the wire connecting the Blade to the monitors, Keith shuffling his feet, and all the paladins gasped or yelped when Coran reached down and yanked out the wires.

“You’re only going to make things worse,” he scolded, shaking the wires at them in one hand. Lira regarded him with cold eyes as though he cared for her opinion. “The Blades, the Galra, they are not to be trifled with!”

Keith bent his head. “Coran,” he said patiently, “I’m just trying to look for my family—”

“You need no family! You don’t deserve—”

Lance stepped forward, hands raised. “Hey, let’s just all—”

Coran whirled on him. “What, you don’t think the Blades are just like the rest of the Galra, that they wouldn’t kill your family, or at the very least let them die, for the greater good? Would you be so accepting, so trusting, then? How do you know they haven’t already done so right this very tick?”

Lance’s face crumpled.

“Coran.” Hunk’s voice was firm. His dark eyes glinted. “That’s enough.”

“Coran?” Allura’s voice buzzed over the commlink. “Report to the castle’s main hangar. Our pod is nearly ready for departure.”

The advisor’s face closed up, and he gave Keith one last sharp look before he swept out of the room, his cheeks blotchy. It felt like he had an ever constant headache.

Maybe breathing in the toxic fumes of a weblum would help spruce things up a bit after all.

:::

The Astral Plane was beautiful, but cold. Shiro had been unsure of whether Black would take him there, of whether he’d be concerned worthy of it, worried of what exactly he would find of Zarkon there. Of if he couldn’t defeat the Emperor. He felt like he was back in the arena again, with endless dark and purple skies greeting him instead of flashing lights and gray walls. Stars twinkled ominously, if they could, and instead of a crowd, a suffocating silence—no wind, or noise, or anything but his laboured breath and pounding heart in is chest—roared in his ears.

“Ah, the Champion.” Zarkon’s voice was cold, like stone scraping against stone. “The slave.”

Zarkon’s yellow eyes glowed like burning magma as Shiro turned to face him, the emperor’s armour broad and his dark cape flapping, somehow, in the nonexistent wind. Did more manifest in this realm, the stronger your bond was with the Black Lion? Shiro’s hands curled into fists. What did the lack of anything say about his?

“You are a fool to face me here,” Zarkon sneered, drawing out the Black Bayard. It turned to shadow smoke, and then formed a long, arced blade. “When you die in this realm, your body will be
good as dead as well. And then I will take control of Voltron, and you will be yet another thing for your precious princess to mourn."

Shiro reared his Galra arm, glowing. “For Altea,” he hissed, and charged.

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Coran was quiet on the way over to the weblum, and Allura tried not to stare. She knew Keith being Galra had affected him poorly, and while she found it unnerving too, she was doing a better job of keeping it under wraps. There were doubts, questions, she hadn’t thought she would have to consider. A half-Galra boy ending up on the planet that just conveniently had one of the only Lions far from Galran discovery? And it wasn’t as though the Lions hadn’t chosen flawed or dangerous paladins before. Zarkon was clear proof of that. Every time she thought of how a Galra was wearing her mother’s armour her stomach squelched, no matter how much she tried to push the feeling away.

“We’re almost to the weblum,” she reported, glancing at their coordinates screen. They’d chosen one of the larger pods that had been modified by Pidge with a booster rocket. Hopefully it wouldn’t have to come in handy. “Let us hope that the scaultrite will be enough to convince the Blade to partner with us.”

“You may speak for yourself,” Coran grumbled, “but I will never trust the Galra again.”

She sighed, pursing her lips. "But Coran, Sarli's daughter went on to form the Blade of Marmora, they must've been on our side, and surely Zindi was—"

"No. We trusted Zarkon. I trusted Zarkon. I watched him save your father's life time and time again. I also watched him destroy our home, twice now. We trusted one Galra. One. And look at what happened because of it."

Allura's voice trembled. "We also trusted the wrong Altean."

Coran gave a humourless chuckle and turned away. "You're too young to understand, princess."

Her jaw clenched. “And you’re acting like a blinded fool.” She swallowed hard. “Keith is Shiro’s brother. That should be enough.”

Coran’s brows rose. “Oh, because Zarkon wasn’t Alfor’s?"

“Keith is many things, but a convincing liar is not one of them—"

“So his impulsive behaviour just conveniently allowed for the destruction of one of the Galra’s most frustrating enemies?”

“So you admit the Galra and Blades are dissimilar?”

“I’m admitting they’re both violent extremists.”

Her face turned stony. “You know, Coran, you’re not the only one who lost everything, so I would appreciate it if you stopped acting like it. You think I like the situation we’re in? You think I want to trust them? You think I don’t wish Keith wasn’t one of them, that I had no reason to doubt? But this is a war, and we must win it, and if to do so we must trust the Galra who have been fighting against the empire while we slept, then we must. So you can stop acting like an angry child. I am not asking you to be friends with them.”

Coran softened slightly. “But I was,” he said quietly, “and then they left us to rot.”
“You let my father seal me away for ten thousand years against my will. Our family’s legacy is blood magic.” Allura turned towards the dark horizon, scattered with stars. “We all have our sins. The Galra’s may be of a people, and may concern countless other peoples, but… when the war is over, they will still be here, and we will have to decide what do with them. Let us not act too hastily in our hate.”

Coran frowned. “Princess—”

“We’re here.”

The weblum glided into view, long and covered in dark scales with ooze in between the cracks, the creature sluggish and thick and circling a clustered, broken planet. It looked old and lifeless, possibly not Galra destroyed, but decayed over time. Planets were put through their own course in due time, after all. Allura put the pod on autopilot and anchored it to the gravity of the nearest small moon of a nearby planet for safety measures, and then went to pull on her suit and helmet. Coran would stay in the pod and keep her on the radio for safety, and would intervene if he needed to.

Her advisor followed her into the pod’s small hangar, as she readied her bike and switched on the poisonous-air filter of her helmet, and took in deep breaths to test it out.

“Get to the third stomach and find the scaultrite gland,” Coran instructed, wringing his mustache. “Then, all you have to do is activate the weblum’s defense mechanisms and collect the excess material from the gland.”

Allura managed to spare him a smile. “I’ll be fine, Coran. I’ll say on the commlink if I need any help, but I’ve harvested scaultrite before.” It hadn’t been in years, since a rather dumb adventure taken with friends one night when they were teenagers, and had too much nunvill. If they could make it then, she could make it now. “I’ll be back soon,” she promised, and then climbed onto her holobike.

She hoped Coran wouldn’t worry or brood too much while she was gone.

:::

Shiro was no-match for someone who had been fighting for ten thousand years. He hit the ground of the Astral Plane hard enough that had this realm been real, he would have broken at least a couple of years. Gasping, he rolled himself over onto his knees, barely able to rise before Zarkon’s great, clawed hand reached down and seized him by the throat, lifting him into the air and eyeing him as though he was a specimen.

“How fitting.” Zarkon tilted his head. “I took your arm, your mind, and now I will take your life, and reclaim the Lion that is rightfully mine.”

“You can’t pilot the Black Lion after everything you’ve done,” Shiro managed. Zarkon’s grip on his throat grew tighter. “You will never lead Voltron again. You’re no paladin.”

Zarkon threw him and Shiro slammed hard into the ground again. “And you think you are?” the emperor hissed. “A worthless experiment gone wrong. A broken soldier. You can’t hold out forever!”

“I don’t have to hold out forever,” Shiro panted. “I just have to keep her away from you long enough for the Black Lion to… to make her own choice.”

“Do you think the Black Lion would allow such a feeble creature to pilot it? Only the powerful can command it.” Zarkon kicked him sharply in the ribs, and Shiro screamed when Zarkon brought down his blade and dug it into Shiro’s side, dragging it out after a few agonizing seconds.
Black blood seemed to stem from the wound, as Shiro cradled his side with one hand and rose shakily to his feet. “No one commands the Black Lion.”

“You dare lecture me, Champion?” Zarkon snarled.

“You’ve forgotten what’s most important between a Lion and their paladin. It’s not about power. It’s about earning each other’s trust.” Shiro wrenched himself upwards, and pressed his glowing hot Galra palm to Zarkon’s face. Skin sizzled, burning, before Zarkon stumbled backwards, howling in pain, the unscarred half of his face turning a bright angry red. Shiro made a desperate grab for the Black Bayard. If he was doing to die here, he’d die bringing Zarkon down with him. At least that way the Black Lion would be free.

Shiro raised his shoulders, and prepared to dodge Zarkon’s next strike, when—

“Wait,” the emperor spluttered. “No—”

The Astral Plane shook as the Black Lion landed, even larger than she was in life, and she roared. Celestial light spilled out of her mouth, a powerful wave that made Shiro drop to his knees and wield his eyes shut, and when he opened them, the Black Lion was softly purring and Zarkon was gone. He could hear the wind. His fingers were sticky with blood.

Black bent down and barely brushed her nose against his head. The Lion couldn’t breathe, but her quintessence still thrummed, light and warm, and seemed to ruffle his hair.

“Thanks girl,” he croaked. Maybe he would die here anyway, with the wound in his side. It felt even worse than the one Haggar had given him.

Black purred, and Shiro looked down as light shone through his fingers, bright and spiralling like vines. He took his hand away from his wound, and saw the whole thing glowing so indistinguishably white he couldn’t see the previously black blood, or the crevice it had made in his body. The pain started to fade and a grin spread over his face.

He leaned his head against his Lion’s, breathing deeply for a moment, and when he opened his eyes he was back in his Lion’s cockpit in Black’s hangar. Faint shimmery light glowed through his paladin armour, until it dissipated. The wound was gone, and he wondered if there’d be a scar. What was one more, much less one born from love, to add to the rest of his collection?

“You saved me,” Shiro said. “Thank you.”

The Black Lion rumbled, low and mellow, and for the first time since the Galra had captured him, Shiro felt truly, and undeniably, safe.

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Harvesting scaultrite was easy enough. Allura made her way down to the second stomach in only a few varga s, skidding down the slimy walls when she discovered a difficulty with her holobike, and had to leave in the first stomach to get through the tube to the second. Her lungs were a little tight, but her helmet was doing a good job of giving her enough clean air to breathe. Getting to the third stomach was a little trickier, but finding the gland that secreted it wasn’t hard, with its clear red and black markers, and it pulsed when she applied pressure, and she knew the secretion would begin.

It was when she saw the Galran pod wedged between two oozing ridges near the back of the weblum’s third stomach that things started to go south. The outline of the pod’s pilot was shone through the moldy, cracked glass of the disembarkment panel; she couldn’t tell if they were alive or not. But now that she had noticed, she had to know.
Allura heard the weblum groan and lurch forwards, her balance upended and sending her towards it. Juices sloshed and a hole connecting the third and fourth stomachs squelched open, pouring more juices, this one yellow and fizzing. Toxic?

“Quiznak.”

Allura edged closer to the pod. It’d do to have some high ground right now anyway. She could exit the weblum and collect the scaultrite like that, but it would still be a more complicated process. Unless she could make it back up to her holobike in time?

She leaned down and dug her hands into the slim crack in the panel, and wrenched it open. It was someone dress in old fashioned, Galra styled armour, but unlike any armour Allura had seen before. It was white with a black bird’s silhouette stamped on the breastplate, the wingspan outstretched. It looked like a vulture. The helmet’s visor was thick and cloudy, possibly fogged up with breath, and Allura was thinking the person she had found was dead when their chest suddenly heaved and they started staggering to their feet. Allura offered them a hand, their grip firm as she hefted them upwards.

“Allura?” Coran’s voice chimed. “What’s going on down there?” Her earrings echoed within the walls of her helmet.

“Just a quick complication,” she replied. “I’m working on it.” She turned back to the Galra in white and raised her voice. “Can you walk?”

The faceless figure nodded, and Allura avoided the growing yellow puddles as they leaped and narrowly mad their way forwards. She didn’t want to know how fast the toxins would burn her suit off her. They climbed their way up the slippery walls, and Allura hauled herself onto the rim of the tube that led back to the second stomach. Pus that hadn’t been there before oozed from the walls, and Allura slipped as they trekked their way up the tube that led to the first stomach. The Galra grabbed her hand, and grunted under the weight, but helped Allura pull herself up all the same.

They found her holobike moored in the belly of the beast, and Allura climbed onto the driver’s seat. The Galra climbed on behind her, and she maneuvered their way up and out the weblum’s long, thick neck, dodging large floods of saliva and planetary debris. They had rocketed out into the emptier vacuum of space, when Allura felt a blaster tip press into her back. She stiffened, and then cursed herself. She should have seen this coming. And although her assailant didn’t speak, the message was clear: get off the bike.

Once she disembarked, Allura watched her bike vanished from view in a blip and streak of white. She drifted aimlessly along scattered pieces of scaultrite for a few ticks, as the weblum slurped through the rest of the planet’s core and moved further away from her, before she pressed numb fingers to her radio. The visor of her helmet was cracked. “Coran? Come pick me up. And with a scaultrite sealer. And…”

A tracker, for the new Galra she’d met? Some way to find her now missing bike? But she had a sinking feeling that if the masked Galra had been who Allura thought, a search was pointless. She would never be found unless she wanted to be.

Princess Merla of the Galra Empire had always been auspicious, after all.
just a side note, for coran's behaviour, and why i’ve chosen to give him the role that typically belonged in canon:

Quite frankly, Allura already had a "trust the Galra" plotline going on in s2, with the Blades, which she handled predominantly in character and like an actual adult. Coran's reaction, to anything, meanwhile, was simply never seen, even though in 2x07 he's shown to have stereotypical ideas of the Uniloo (which Allura decidedly does not). Coran can also be quite harsh. His anger and snappish, "No, Shiro lost Allura!" in 1x11 reflects this, and given the rough times he's been through now in particular, and some of the memories it arises, well... while his temper isn't perhaps deserved, I hope it can be understood, and that you will all trust me to handle all of these issues sensitively and appropriately, because I promise to you I will try my hardest.

Next chapter ups the the ante even more in terms of plot. Get hype.
Divided In Action

Chapter Summary

The Blades agree to negotiations. Shiro and Allura face a hard truth. Alpha-Traz is infiltrated.

ARC III: Holts and Hopes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Divided In Action

Shiro was waiting for her on the bridge when Allura got back. Her head was still spinning, thoughts wound up too tightly to speak, and the only one who would understand the gravity of her suspicion was Coran, perhaps, who she didn't want to unload onto his shoulders with the state he was in. And right now, as her eyes took in Shiro, she was just happy her Black Paladin was alive. Merla could wait.

"I knew you could do it," she said, walking briskly to meet him. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he said, and uncurled his arm from around his side. There was no blood she could detect, however. "Thanks to Black."

"So, she's—"

"Free." Shiro's eyes glimmered. "We're free."

Her lungs eased, and Allura gripped his shoulder. "Good."

His eyebrows rose slightly. "I would have thought you would've been on the bridge," he said. "Where were you?"

"Coran and I went out on a mission," she explained, "since Lira explained all communications with the Blades have been blocked for the quintant. We secured scaultrite from a weblum, as they'll need it for a new base. Hopefully it will be a good bargaining chip in our favour once communications are opened once more."

"And you were safe?"

"Safe as can be, in the belly of the beast. And your duel with Zarkon?"

He turned to the stars. "We can talk more about it later. For now, we should talk to Lira about getting a communications channel open. If Zarkon is weakened by the loss of the Black Lion, and the Blades can become true allies, we have a new opening to do some lasting damage to the Galra."

She frowned, but didn't push it. "It seems like she and the paladins are getting along well."

He cracked a grin. "I hope Lance hasn't tried to flirt with her?"

Allura snorted softly. "Not yet. Although I fear Coran is... taking the revelation of Keith's Galra heritage rather hard."
Shiro's eyes were steady. "And you?"

"I'm managing."

Shiro pursed his lips. "I know he's my brother, but that doesn't mean you can't talk to me about your feelings over it."

Allura slowly turned to look at him. "I would have thought it would bother you?"

"I've known him basically since the day he was born. You and Coran haven't. And the paladins haven't lost anything to the Galra, really." Shiro swallowed. His metal hand flexed. "At least not the way you and I have. But I guess... I know him. And Ulaz freed me for a reason, and... Humans, back on Earth, have done some really terrible things to each other. My people have done bad things. We've had bad things happen to us. And sometimes it isn't grey. Sometimes it really is black and white. But I know where Keith stands. And he's as much Galra as I am."

She pressed her lips together in a thin line, and bowed her head, even as her hand reached to cup the elbow of his flesh arm, and gave it a slight squeeze. "Leave me," she requested quietly. "I need time to prepare for our negotiations with the Blades. The team will be pleased to see you."

Shiro swallowed, and stepped away. "As you wish, Princess."

She called the rest of the team and Lira onto the bridge a varga later. Coran wouldn't look at Keith, but filed in anyway, and Shiro wasn't sure if he should stand beside Allura or not, as they got the communication channel connected with some of Lira's help, when the princess gave him an expectant look and he stepped forward to stand by her side. This time, she grasped at his prosthetic.

"I could never hate you," she murmured. "I could never doubt you. I will trust Keith. And I will trust in time, he will prove he is as much like Zarkon as you are."

Shiro's heart burst, her fingers warm even on the cool metal, and he realized that he really wanted to kiss her—and he might've been stupid enough to, if the rest of the team hadn't been there, and Kolivan's picture hadn't snapped onto screen a moment later. Allura directed her gaze to the screen, and heart pounding, Shiro did his best to collect himself, as Kolivan surveyed the scene, his eyes landing on Lira.

His eyes widened by a fraction. "You're alive." But then his stony mask smoothed back over, and her shoulders went rim-rod straight.

"Commander. My status report is—"

"No need," Kolivan said, and she shut her mouth. "You're alive, and therefore able. What is your location?"

"I—"

"We would prefer to keep that classified," Allura cut in, "until more negotiations have been settled. Commander Kolivan, we have procured the scaultrite necessary for the beginnings of another base for the Blade of Marmora, with guidance from Lira. We are still interested in being allies. Please accept our peace offering so we can proceed forward in the fight against Zarkon."

"Lira will deliver the scaultrite to my location," Kolivan said. Allura could vaguely see the hint of bandages on his shoulder, from Hunk's blast to his back, and Antok's masked face blurry beyond his shoulder. "Which I will disclose to her, and her alone. She will leave as soon as possible, in a pod equipped properly for the coordinates I will transmit to her Blade."
"There must be at least one mission you have to complete that Voltron would be useful for," said Shiro.

"Voltron is a horrible Altean invention that used my people's blood for its founding," Kolivan said coldly. "And Zarkon tore the universe apart for it, once planets got rid of their armies because they didn't think they would need any, so long as Voltron was around, and look at what happened."

"So you cracked a few eggs while making an omelette," Lance argued. "That doesn't mean the whole brunch is ruined, y'know? You've lost a lot of eggs. Let us take the risk so you can save a few more. That doesn't sound so bad."

Kolivan's face went blank and stern, utterly done, on the holoscreen. "Perhaps Voltron is not a threat after all, then, with Paladins like this."

"Commander," Lira said. "Ulaz died believing in the Champion, in the Blue Lion. The Paladins are allied with the Balmerans, Hootowlings, and Olkari. If Thace was here, you know he would be in favour of—"

"Well Thace is not here," said Kolivan, his voice rising. His eyes landed on Shiro. "And we know whose fault that is."

Antok's voice emerged from under his mask. "Kolivan. The prisoner."

The commander turned to him and raised his furry brows. "Slav?"

"Sriv died in the extraction process. They've amped Slav's security." His tone was monotone. "If the paladins are willing to risk their lives for our cause, why not let them?"

Kolivan levelled his eyes to Allura, and then to Lance, who did his best not to squirm. "Perhaps what the boy said is right. We will let you risk your lives for our cause, if you choose to, and then we can talk of being allies. The details of the mission will be faxed over. We expect an answer within the varga."

The commlink shut with a wave of quick static before the holoscreen vanished point blank, and Allura turned back to her team. Hunk was patting Lance on the back.

"Good idea Lance," he said.

Lance grinned sheepishly. "You don't survive growing up with four siblings without learning how to bargain."

"I'll call you back to the bridge once I receive the mission details," Allura said. "You should take this time to get some rest. We might be in the fight of our lives."

"The prison Slav is at, Alpha-Traz, is dangerous," Lira said, "and heavily guarded."

"We pulled off a rescue mission at Zarkon's central command," Lance said, and caught Shiro's eye and his bravado deflated. "Sort of, anyway. I'm sure we can do this."

"I'll see what I can do about rigging makeshift cloaking devices for all our Lions," Pidge said. "Hunk, can you help? All hands on deck would be appreciated."

Hunk smiled. "Sure—Lance, coming?"

"Nah, I'm good. I don't need to see you two blabbing tech mumbo-jumbo than I already do. But that
talk of food made me hungry." He turned to Lira. "Have you eaten?"

She blinked. "N-no?"

"Great. Keith, c'mon. Let's figure out how to use the kitchen and get something made for all three of us." Lance gave Coran a small smile. "D'you want to come?"

Coran frowned, and pointedly did not look at Keith. "I'm alright, but thank you, Lance," he said with a curt smile.

Shiro clapped Keith on the shoulder. "I'll come along. Defeating Zarkon in the Astral Plane works up quite an appetite," he revealed, and all the paladins' faces lit up.

"We'll eat next to my tech stuff," Pidge declared, dragging all of them out of the room. "I gotta hear about this!" Talking and traces of laughter fell silent once the doors closed behind the paladins and Lira, and Allura pursed her lips as she approached Coran from behind.

"Princess," he sighed, "I don't want to hear—"

"It's not about that," she said. "At least, not directly. I want to go on the mission to Alpha-Traz myself. And I want Keith to come with me."

Coran's eyebrows shot up. "Princess, why—"

She turned away from him, and back to where the castle's largest holoscreens had loomed. "We'll need something Galra to access their technology. Perhaps on another time Pidge can create something so suit hands have Galra tech like Shiro's palm embedded in them, but for now, we need a living being to guide us through the prisons. Shiro came with me last time. I want Keith, Pidge, and Lance to come with me this time."

She could tell Coran was struggling to hold in his initial response, and all he gritted out was, "Why?"

"Pidge is our hacker. Lance can bring up the rear with his guns. Keith and I can lead the charge into the prison. I can shapeshift and he can actually access the tech. Shiro and Hunk will stay here in the castle and rest, and will be a formidable rescue team if we need them to be."

Coran sighed and scowled heavily. "Keeping him here won't keep him any safer, princess."

"What do you mean?"

"Shiro."

"Coran, I am not bringing him along because he just went through a very strenuous ordeal of battling and beating Zarkon for the Black Lion," she said sharply. "Yes, I want to keep him safe, as much as I want to keep any of the paladins safe, but—"

"You wanted to go to the Blades with him."

"I owed him."

"Did you? You sacrificed yourself for him in the cargo cruiser—"

"He is our Black Paladin. It was a practical choice."

"Like how trusting Ulaz based on Shiro's gut feeling was?"
Allura's eyes burned. "Coran, if you have a point, spit it out."

Coran loosed a sigh. "My point is if you care for him, tell him. War steals all the time we have far quicker than we think it will." His eyes softened, before he stepped away. "Don't make my mistakes."

Allura turned around to face him. "Coran—"

"I will go look at the Lions and make sure they're fully powered. And—"

"Coran."

He stopped, resigned. "Yes, princess?"

She pressed her mouth into a thin line. "Before he leaves, talk to Keith, please. I think both of you would find it very beneficial."

"I think that highly unlikely," Coran said tersely, and Allura made her eyes pleading. "But I may... try."

This time, Allura let him go, only softly saying, "Thank you," when he was by the door. He didn't look back.

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"I don't like it."

"You don't like anything," Antok said. The makeshift hideout they'd gone to, one they'd been stationed at as young soldiers, still had the creaking equipment and dense walls to keep out the cold of the ice moon it was built on. Other Marmora were resting or healing, but Kolivan never slept. Antok could just begrudge him for it, but he still approached his Commander, coming up to his side so their shoulders nearly touched. "Thace still reported in. It may have been pre-recorded instead of a typical holoscreen, but it's safer that way. What you told him to do in the past."

"And he only listens to me when things get very bad," Kolivan grunted. "If the witch knows of a spy, we—" His temper burst. Antok didn't flinch. "Dammit, Ulaz was supposed to stay stationed at central command, and then he blew it to free that blasted boy, and then we had to scramble, and now Thace—"

"—will be fine," Antok said. "He has enough of you to survive."

Kolivan turned towards him, and Antok's mask shimmered away. He let their brows touch. "He has too much of her. And what if he's tried to look for her? What if that is what set the witch off—"

"Your brother will come home, arlan. I swear it. You will not lose another sibling to this war."

Kolivan softened, but the deep crease in his forehead didn't fade. "I worry that Ulaz's death has made him reckless, less caring of himself."

"Or it could make him fight harder."

Kolivan shook his head. Their noses nearly bumped. "No. I know if I lost the one I care for, I would —" His eyes flickered to Antok's, and then he pulled away and cleared his throat. "We should double check Thace's commlink was properly encrypted, once the call's signal was terminated. And prepare for new channels to be opened up. If Voltron decides to go to Alpha-Traz, we can put the
next phase of our plan in place."

A little sigh escaped Antok's lips. Kolivan almost wanted to look at him. He was only ever unmasked when they were alone, not that Kolivan could fault him for it. "And Lira?"

"She's a talented fighter. She will make the right choices when the time comes."

"She's young. She may grow attached."

Kolivan gazed at one of the broken computers, cracked open on its side. The wires splayed out, frizzled and frayed. Searching for connection, only to never find it. "She'll be strong," he said. Ulaz had always been strong-willed, if nothing else, and not often self-destructive. Hopefully Lira had inherited the best of him.

There was a loud beep from a nearby monitor, and Antok reached over Kolivan's shoulder and turned it off with a twist of a knob. "I'll go check the medbays," he said, moving closer to him again. Antok brushed his lips over the scar that ran down the left side of his face. "Try and get some sleep, my Commander."

Finally, the corner of Kolivan's lips twitched upwards. "No promises," he mumbled, but he let himself watch Antok leave, his mask going back up, before Kolivan turned back to the screens and data running across them, as more and more refugee Blades reported in with their locations and statuses, their Blade signals red dots against blue.

He just hoped they wouldn't become targets.

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"But Zarkon still has the Black Bayard?" Keith pressed, standing near Pidge's shoulder, and Shiro nodded. The Green Lion towered silently over the five paladins and Lira.

"Now that you're the sole paladin of your Lion," Pidge said, "there must be a way to regain it." He could practically see the gears turning in her head, alongside the code that shone over her glasses.

"I'm not sure," Shiro said, "or I think the princess would have mentioned it. The next time we meet Zarkon in battle, I'll have to find a way to take it from him."

"It feels like you'd be bringing a knife to a gun fight," Lance said.

Lira shot him a look. "What's wrong with a knife in a gun fight? It's much more efficient."

"It's an Earthling phrase," Lance said. "It means Shiro would be going in mostly empty handed."

Hunk's brow furrowed, and then his eyes lit up as he turned to Shiro. "Maybe you wouldn't have to be. Maybe I could construct a new bayard for you. We could use my own as a model, and see what we can do?"

"That's genius Hunk!" Pidge beamed and Hunk sheepishly smiled back.

"And you can make it all cool, and glowing," Lance gushed, waving his arms around to imitate guns, and then a sword. This time no one provided sound effects.

"What weapon form would you want it to take?" Keith asked Shiro, who smiled.

Given what little he knew of Altean alchemy, he didn't think the recreation of a bayard was exactly possible—and furthermore, if it had been, Allura would have attempted or told him of it before—but
he wasn't about to shoot the idea down. It was practical, if not applicable, and it was the first time in
days Shiro had seen all his paladins smile.

"I just thought it'd be nice if Shiro didn't have to go into battle empty handed," Hunk said, blushing
slightly at all the praise.

Shiro clapped him on the back. "It's a good idea," he said. "I'll ask Allura and Coran if there's
anything you'd need their help for, with Altean technology. And I bet the Olkari could help us out
with it too." He glanced at Pidge. "How're the cloaking devices going?"

"Good." The green paladin pushed up their glasses and didn't pause in her rapid typing. "I can't find
a way to stretch the algorithm to go over anything too big, though. I don't think I'll be able to make
something that can cloak Yellow and Black, or at least not on short notice. Blue and Red are small
enough but the cloaking won't last as long for them as it does for Green, either."

"That's alright," came a voice from the door, and they swivelled around to see Allura walking
towards them. Shiro stood up. "Black and Yellow will be staying here. I've outline those needed for
the mission. Keith, Lance, Pidge, you're coming with me."

Shiro started, and then stopped, and then started again. "Princess, are you sure—"

She raised her eyebrows and gave him a polite smile. "What? I'm not going alone." The paladins
slowly looked between them, and Lira's brow furrowed. Finally, though, Shiro gave her a tight
smile. "Team, you heard the princess. Be ready to head out in a few vargas, I'm guessing?"

Allura nodded. "We'll be wormholing to Alpha-Traz shortly."

"Count me in," Lira said.

The princess shook her head. "You're supposed to be delivering the scaultrite to Kolivan."

"We won't need the scaultrite for at least twenty quintants. I know Galra prisons, and I'm able to fit
through small spaces." It was true that Lira wasn't much taller than Pidge. "And if I don't come back,
Kolivan will simply have to give one of you the proper coordinates to drop the scaultrite off at."

Pidge pushed up her glasses. "It would be smart to have more than one person who can access Galra
tech while we're there. If the prison is big, and we need to split up—"

"Fine," Allura said, raising her eyes back to Lira. "We'll let you—"

"Just don't tell Kolivan," Lira said quickly.

Something akin to irritation but not quite twinged in Allura's chest; she felt rather like a young nanny,
bartering with her ward of what could and could not be told to the family and parents she worked
for. And already, it was surprisingly hard to be too stern with Lira. Perhaps it was because she
looked a bit like Merla, the last time Allura had seen her. Before the war, before the weblum, that is.

"Very well," Allura said with a stiff nod. "But Shiro and Hunk will be holding down the ship while
we're gone." She thought of Coran. If you care for him, tell him. Ancients, she hoped Coran
wouldn't try to speak to Shiro on her behalf while she was gone. She turned to him and Hunk,
shaking the thought from her mind. "I trust that you'll be hard at work constructing a new bayard?"

"Yes ma'am," said Hunk, and she smiled.

"Then I'll leave you to it. Paladins, do whatever you need to, to be ready in a varga. We're aiming to
be in and out of Alpha-Traz within the quintant."

:::

Alpha-Traz is a heavily fortified moon, Shiro had explained. The entire thing is one massive prison. There's guards and sentries, and only a few docking bays. You'll have to be fast and maintain the element of surprise for this to work. Once inside, the mainframe will have to be shut down, and then you'll have to find Slav.

Pidge, you should go to the mainframe on your own. The vents will be able to take you there. Lira and Lance, you're in charge of bringing up rare and managing damage control, making sure no guards sound the alarm while Pidge is working. Once the system's shut down, anyone will be able to access the tech. In the meantime, Allura and Keith will be in charge of finding Slav if we can't get the mainframe down fast enough.

The castleship will be hiding behind a nearby meteor and the cloaked Lions will be hidden in moon caves near Alpha-Traz. If cannot find Slav within five vargas, I'll give the order to pull back unless you give me good reason not to.

Good luck, team. Be safe.

:::

Allura was glad that the paladin-in-the-trash ploy had worked a second time once she'd stolen command clothes from some of the docking bay guards, even if Keith didn't seem happy about it as he climbed out of the hovering trash bin once they were in a command uniform room, dimly lit and dusty.

"It smelled horrible in there," he complained, shaking off a soggy fruit peel from his ankle.

Allura ignored him and strode forward, shucking more armour off the wall and passing it to him. He'd need a smaller size than she did. "Get dressed. We don't have much time. You can wash the stench off later."

Keith frowned, his eyes cloudy, but he pulled on the armour anyway, first the breastplate and then the greaves. It was a heavy fit over his paladin armour. "It feels wrong, to be wearing this."

"Why?" She was already garbed in it, after all.

He held the purple Galra helmet in his hands. "It makes me look like one of them."

Allura took a small step forward. "You are one of them," she said, almost gently. "But that doesn't mean you're like them." She took his helmet and placed it over his head; it slipped a bit too much over his eyes. Like a kid playing at being soldier. "Now come on, Shiro will get worried if we're gone too long."

It coaxed a small smile out of him. "Okay. Let's go find Slav."

:::

The mainframe room only had one main guard, and Lira took him down easily once they'd dropped from the vents. The grate hit his head and then her Blade cut down his legs, and the sentry fizzled out in a shower of sparks and sliced metal. Lance dropped down next to her as she straightened up and they both caught Pidge once she fell through the vents. She made her way to the mainframe database, all purple and with holopads and too many keys to count, and started typing rapidly.
"Ooh, level fifteen encryption, not bad," the Green Paladin remarked, smirking, before typing away. Lira grabbed Lance by the arm. "We shouldn't wait down here. We want the advantage of height and being hidden. The adjacent hallway is tall. We can hide up in the beams and gun down anyone who poses a threat."

She let go of his arm, and Lance nodded. He'd killed Galra before—it was inevitable before, in battle, both in and out of a Lion—but the thought of sitting up in the rafters and gunning down people who just walked down the wrong hallway made his stomach squelch. Hopefully they wouldn't have to.

Lira ducked her head out the door and checked to make sure the hallway was clear before beckoning him forwards, and she cupped her hands together as a foothold for him, and helped hoist him up to the nearest rafter. Lance struggled and then got himself settled, and watched as she took a running start at the far wall, jumped, and then kicked herself up in the arm, a rafter beam slamming into her stomach as her arms hefted herself up the rest of the way.

Lira kept her legs closer to her chest, her borrowed blaster in one hand with her finger over the trigger. Lance tried not to think of the few seconds advantage she'd have if they were found, in the moments it would take for his bayard to take its gun form, yet he couldn't will himself to have his gun now as a pre-emptive measure.

"You're not a soldier, are you?" Lira said quietly, and he looked up to see a hint of a smile on her face.

"No." He shook his head, and offered up a small smile of his own. "I'm just a boy from Cuba—a country on Earth. It has beaches, and amazing music, and my…" His family.

What, you don't think the Blades are just like the rest of the Galra, Coran had shouted. That they wouldn't kill your family, or at the very least let them die, for the greater good? Would you be so accepting, so trusting, then? How do you know they haven't already done so right this very tick?

"Your family is fine, Lance," she said. "You'd know if they weren't."

He looked at her with wide eyes. "How?"

"You feel it, even before you know. An ache. Like you're walking up stairs in the dark and constantly missing the step. You'd know."

His gaze softened. "Because you did?"

Lira swallowed and turned away. "My parents were farmers. We lived in a Galra colony, on a planet called Triyx. There were the warmest summers, and so much wheat. When I was eight, my father gave me a sickle, and I used to help him cut down the fields. " Lira drew her knees up to her chest. "They died a couple months later—Galra resistance fighters, not Blades, were found, and multiple villages got massacred for it. And now I help cut down the vermin of the Empire, those who look at my parents' deaths and see something good about it. So that no one will lose their family that way again."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Lance said softly, even as he wrestled with himself. Was it bad he was grateful she was sitting too far away for him to have to figure out if he should pat her on the shoulder or not? Lira didn't seem like a physical type.

"And it won't happen to you. I've looked at Galra charts, as recently as ten quintants ago. They're not interested in your planet yet." She gestured to his bayard. "Besides, you make a much better paladin
than a soldier."

His shoulders eased. "So you don't think Voltron is terrible anymore?"

A smile toyed at her lips. "Only mostly terrible, and you're the worst," she teased.

"Well at least I beat Keith in something."

Lira glanced down. The hallway remained silent. "We're going to be here for a while," she said. "So —" She spread out her leg and her foot poked his. "Your family. Do they all wear your strange 'jackets' too?"

Lance smiled. "They do." He'd gotten his from his oldest brother, Luis, when Lance had been ten and it'd been far too small, when Luis had gone away for university.

Lira leaned forwards. "Tell me about them."

So he did.

:::

To Keith's credit, it wasn't his fault that things started to go poorly. A patrol came through they couldn't dodge, and the Lieutenant with them wouldn't be deterred with excuses as to why they were going the wrong way, so they marched along sullenly with the five other Galra with him in the opposite direction as to where Slav was supposed to be.

Allura did her best not to be nervous. If push came to shove, Pidge, Lance, and Lira could find Slav. It'd work out. If only she had some way to let them know they needed to start working. And Slav was supposed to be found before the mainframe was shut down, and Pidge wouldn't take long.

Allura knew she and Keith were running out of time.

She glanced at Keith and caught his eye, and gave a meaningful jerk of her head, hoping he would understand. His eyes widened under the slits of his mask, and she could picture the look of puzzlement on his face. Quiznak.

The Lieutenant led them to a hangar full of cargo, and stepped aside to let them in as the few ships parked there finished unloading. "I expect all this supplies to be carried to the S.C.I.-bay in record time," he ordered, and then turned and left.

Allura loosed a breath once his footsteps had faded. Maybe now she and Keith could get out of here and go find Slav. They just needed a reason to leave first, so the other Galra around them wouldn't be more suspicious than they likely already were.

"Watch it Threk," one of the Galra snapped at the one helping them lift up a box. It had nearly landed on their foot. Threk had been craning his neck like Allura too, to make sure the Lieutenant was gone.

"Sorry," Threk winced. "Lu wouldn't like hearing this—have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"Rebel activity, and so soon after the traitor base got blown up. It looks like we won't be getting any reprieve in new prisoners."

Rebels? Allura inhaled sharply and shuffled closer, causing Keith to follow her lead, as they picked
up a crate closer to the two Galra. She supposed if there were rebel Galra forces within the Empire, it
made sense there had to be actual rebel, non-Galra forces too, but she'd never seen or heard any signs
of them.

The first Galra rolled their eyes as they and Threk hefted the box up. "Anyone interesting?" they
asked flatly.

"Heard there might be an Annic, but that's it," Threk said, and they carried on in their cargo lifting.

Allura not too subtly dropped her end of her and Keith's crate, and it banged onto his foot. He
hissed and stepped backwards, and Allura feigned surprise. "That looks like a very poor dent," she
said. "Come—" Ancients, why had she paused and decided to use a name? "Kryxen," she managed
finally, bolstering her volume, "we should get that looked at—"

Keith bit back a scowl and tried to play along. "Yes, of course, thank you—"

They hurried out of the hangar and back into the thankfully empty hallway as quick they could.

"Enough of this," Allura hissed, and pulled him aside closer to the wall. She linked up her earrings to
Pidge. "Pidge?"

"Princess?" It sounded as though she'd interrupted the paladin in a very deep thought.

"I know you're in the middle of shutting down the mainframe," Allura said quickly and quietly, "but
I need you to do a scan and give us directions to at least where Slav might be. Open up a separate
channel and start examining the prison's database—"

There was the sound of typing, and then Pidge said, "Alright, I have it open and am tracking your
location on my armour's techpad. You're on the southern slope on the second floor. You need to
travel north and bypass the prison cells on the third floor—it's just for political ones—and move to
the fourth floor and find where they keep their scientists—"

Pidge abruptly broke off, and Allura paused. "Pidge?"

There was a ragged edge to the Green Paladin's voice, after a quick clearing of her throat. "Nothing.
Keep going. I'll keep the scan channel open so I can give you more directions if you need them, and
keep working on shutting down the mainframe. You should get moving, there's another patrol
headed your way that's showing up on the security feed."

"We're on our way to get Slav," Allura affirmed, and went to turn off her earrings (or set them at low
volume) when Pidge's voice pitched upwards.

"Slav isn't what you think it—" There was a loud crash from the other end of the commlink, and
Allura's heart skyrocketed when she heard blaster fire.

There was a scuffling nose and then Lance's voice. "Pidge, we gotta move—"

"There's a way out through this exit," said Lira.

"Princess, we've been compromised," Pidge said hastily. "Keep—"

The connection snapped off, and Allura turned her earrings off the rest of the way as she and Keith
plowed forwards, away from the upcoming patrol and towards the northern part of the second floor.
They'd have to get to the elevators and go up level by level to the next elevator—a precaution against
escape—and she could feel her muscles straining to hold her shapeshifting for much longer, but she
kept moving.
She had to.

"There's too many of them," Lance said, trying not to sound panicked. It wasn't lost on him that he and Lira were being backed dangerously close into the corner of the room, where Pidge had torn panels off the holopads and database and was rigging them up and still tying madly, trying to finish what Allura had asked of her.

Nor he had he missed, the same as his marksmanship, as he gunned down one approaching, firing soldier, and then another, that the exit Lira had spoken of was painfully tiny. It seemed like was a sort of small fire escape, and even for Pidge it would be a tight fit. What would happen to the rest of them? There was no way he could get his lanky limbs to fit in there.

"Time to get creative," Lira said, firing off her blaster, before she took out her Blade, let it grow, and hurled it behind her without looking.

It embedded itself halfway through the metal panel above the exit, and she turned to press her foot down on the hilt. Lance only managed to cover her with blaster fire just in time, drawing up his paladin shield to deflect as Lira wrenched the blade farther through the wall, forcing the exit open wider and prying the panels apart, before she was winding back around him, shooting down a Galra and snatching something round and small from their belt. She tossed it down the exit, and Lance and Pidge flinched when it exploded.

"It'll be big enough now," Lira said helpfully. "For you."

"Wait, what about—"

"Knowledge or death," she said, and she kicked him down the shoot.

Lance heard Pidge follow a few seconds later, panels bumping against the sleek metal walls as they both shot down and careened to a stop when it evened out from a steeper slide to something big enough they could probably stand up in, if Lance ducked down enough. Maybe these were vents made for the guards to be able to move around without the prisoners even being aware? Or a safety protocol of some kind.

Both those options were vague, unimportant thoughts in his mind, as Lance looked back up the shoot and could hear distant gunfire. Lira was holding her own, but she wouldn't be able to last forever. The light of the top of the shoot was dim and clouded with purple, and then there was a hissing sound—the exit was somehow being resealed—and then he heard gruff voices speaking before the sound broke off completely.

Lira had sealed the exit so they couldn't be followed. Lance's chest constricted, before he looked away to Pidge, who was curled up with her knee to her chest. She sniffled. She must've hit it hard in the fall. One of her panels that fallen down with her was bent and broken with splayed wires sticking out on one side.

Lance went and pulled Pidge up to her feet. "Can you walk?" he asked.

Pidge nodded. "Not fast, maybe, but…"

"Good. We should move to another vent, and then you can plug back into the mainframe, and tell me where the Galra keep their immediate prisoners on this ship. Then you can go find Keith and Allura
and get out of here with Slav if you can."

Pidge regarded him for a moment, wary, and then nodded and tucked her panel under her arm as she trudged forwards, down the flat right turn of the ventilation system. "This way."

"Wait, there it is—" Keith grabbed Allura's arm before she could jog past the hallway, and made her stop and turn to see the Galra letters carved above the doorway. They looked close enough to the English spelling of Slav, funnily enough, even if there were extra characters he couldn't even place with the Galran they'd learned over the past six months in space.

Allura tilted her head to the side. "S.L.A.V.," she read aloud. "That can't be right. We're looking for a person, not a department heading?"

"You got any better ideas?" Keith said a tad tersely.

Allura shot him an annoyed glance. "Well considering I'm the one who can read Galra—"

Footsteps sounded down the hall, and Keith slammed his palm on the access screen, and Allura didn't have any more time to argue before they dove inside the SLAV department once the doors opened.

They had stumbled into a rather small lab, massive bulky generators plugged into the walls and plugs pouring out of them, and hooked up to other things. Screens bathed the whole lab in a strange green light, as though they were underwater, and there was a screen more manuel than the ones back at the castle, with holographic corks, somehow, holding up real photographs and slim holopads full of calculations. And standing in front of the screen was Slav, who whirled around to face Allura and Keith with a jump.

Three eyes underneath a mop of dark hair that curled in clumps at the end were wide in surprise. There was a thick chain around their neck, and they had two of their four hands anxiously clasped together, their arms bent over their sweatered prison uniform to allow it. Large, fin like ears fanned out on either side of their head, a thick chain with small holes around their neck. It seemed to move in time with their breathing.

Keith strode forward. "Are you Slav?"

"Slav?" there was a slight wheeze to the scientist's voice. As though they weren't used to speaking out loud. "Slav isn't a person."

"We were told to come here seeking the scientist named Slav," Allura said. "Are you not who we seek?"

The scientist teetered slightly on their remaining legs, which were stubby and covered in large, tight boots up to the knees. They looked rather full. "I'm the only person in Slav. My name is Brizo—Briz for short."

"Well, what is Slav, then?" said Keith impatiently.

Brizo looked between them, blinking in confusion. "Self Ligating Artificial Voltron. What else would it mean?"
Breaking out of Alpha Traz is a lot harder than breaking in. Conclusions are drawn and a new path is forged.

Allura's patience was thin. "What do you mean, artificial Voltron?" she repeated tersely.

"Voltron was the most powerful weapon ever created," Briz said, as though it were obvious. "Why wouldn't the Galra try to replicate it? And who are you anyhow? You don't act like the usual guards."

"We're not guards," Keith said, taking off his helmet. His hair was a little haphazard in the back. "I'm a Paladin of Voltron, and this is Princess Allura of Altea."

"We're here to rescue you," Allura explained. "Alongside the Blade of Marmora."

"Rescue me?" Briz blinked again, but this time the eye in the centre of their forehead stayed open. It was surprisingly eerie. "I can't leave my project right now. We're at a very precarious stage."

Keith took a step forward, scowling. "Clearly you're not hearing us. We're here to get you out of here. The projects you're working on for the Galra are dangerous and hurting people. Don't you want to put a stop to it? You're their prisoner. Don't you want to be free?"

"Free?" Briz repeated the word as though in a dream. As though they hadn't heard or thought of it for a hundred years, and maybe they hadn't. Their first left arm came up to touch the brace around their neck. Small lines crept up from behind it; gills, Allura realized. They were an aquatic species. The brace was helping them live outside of water. "It's been so long since I saw the Isleings, and... the oceans of my people."

"Then come with us," said Allura. "You won't have to work for the Galra anymore. You can fight with us for peace, and go home to your family."

"I can't leave my research," Briz repeated.

"How big is it?" said Allura, beginning to lose her patience. "Perhaps we can take it with us."

"It's small, but not incredibly stable—jerky movements may upend it—"

"Then you hold it, and just let us keep you safe while we get out of here." The princess turned to Keith. "See if you can get a communications channel open with Pidge, Lance, and Lira. We need to round everyone up and get them out of here."
All three of Briz's eyes blinked. "Others came with you?"

"Others who are risking their lives to get you out of here?" Keith said shortly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yes, yes they did."

Allura shot him a look. "Keith, the channel."

He had the decency to look sheepish. "Oh, right. Yeah." He started typing into the pad under the greave of his left arm, and Allura took a better look at Briz's laboratory as the scientist shuffled over to their 'project'. It looked like a blue, luminescent egg, but was hooked up to plugs from the wall and pulsed with electricity.

Allura peered over Briz's shoulder. "Is it... alive?"

"No," said Briz gloomily. "Using quintessence, I've managed to make some very smart A.I., but the sentient quality of the Lions, their ability to grow and change and feel, and exercise real agency... is unlike anything I've seen in the galaxy. I want to save this egg though. Perhaps it can be useful, and..." Briz cradled it close to their chest. Allura got the feeling it was the closest thing they'd had to a connection with another living being in a long time.

"Hold it tight," she instructed, not unkindly. "Keith?"

He was frowning at his tech-pad. "Mostly static, but the signal is saying it's from Pidge. Lance isn't showing up at all. Maybe they got separated?"

Allura looked between him and the door. They needed a solution, and fast. "You take Brizo back to the rendezvous point," she said. "Access the tech as you go and keep going. I'll go find the others. With luck, Pidge will have let down the constrains by that time, and we can get out easily."

"I should go find the others," Keith said. "They'll need you at the Castle if something goes wrong, and I'm the one who messed up with the Blades, I should be the one taking the risk—"

"Which is exactly why you should be the one who gets their precious scientist out of here safely," Allura objected. "And, with all due respect, I am a stronger and a more talented fighter in hand to hand combat than you. I am trusting you to keep Briz safe." Her steely blue eyes met his darker grey ones. "I know you won't let me down. Now go."

Keith finally nodded, his jaw tight. "Alright."

Briz waddled after him to the door, clutching the egg in their four hands, when Allura said, "Briz, is there anything in this lab that's still dangerous? That the Galra could still use?"

Briz nodded. "Loads of things."

Allura picked up her gun. "Understood."

She waited until they were down the hallway to exit and fire off at the generators and screens. Solid screens cracked and holographic ones flashed **ERROR WARNING.** The generators blew and the heat ghosted her face until the doors swished shut at the last second. Allura let out a breath. Now to find the rest of the paladins. And if Pidge was able to connect to the comm channel, and wasn't with Lance, then Allura had a hunch on exactly where the Green Paladin had gone.

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The third floor was dark and densely packed with cells, but Lance found most of the prisoners were
snoring loudly or trapped behind heavy iron doors, and therefore couldn't see him. He'd shot the guards at the front of the hall with quick blasts of his bayard, and ran until the iron doors on either side lessened to bars and largely empty cells. Dammit, where was she?

"Lira?" he hissed, jogging past one of the last rows of cells. If she wasn't here, where was he supposed to look next? He couldn't just leave her. "Lira!"

"Lance?" He turned, finding her cell down the end of the aisle. She sounded surprised, and her hair had been pushed back away from her face, revealing the dark blue bruise on her cheek. Then she sounded pissed. "Lance, what in Dylak's name are you doing here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I came back for you, I couldn't just let you stay here—" Lance kept his blaster at his side as he strode over to the panel attached to her cell. Where were the right controls? These were all in Galran. He really had to talk to Pidge about getting translators put into their paladin suits. He looked back up at Lira through the bars. "Which one is the release button?"

"I don't know what those words look like to you, I can read Galran!"

"You know for someone being rescued, you're not being very helpful."

Lira gritted her teeth. "Fine, one should look like—one of your ocean waves. And the other like a tree."

Lance scanned the row, and then hit one button after the other. There was something that looked vaguely like ocean waves, and then something much stalkier that did indeed look like a tree. The cell door swung open. Lira stepped out, rubbing absentmindedly at the bruise on her cheek.

"What are you doing?" she reminded again. "You weren't supposed to—"

"Paladins of Voltron don't leave people behind," Lance said. "Not for good." He glanced at her hips. "Where's your knife?"

"They confiscated it."

"Do you know where it is?"

"It should be somewhere on this floor, but I don't know—"

The door opened, and Lance stepped in front of her and turned around in one fluid motion, ready to fire, when he quickly lowered his gun, his face splitting into a smile. "Allura!"

"Lance?" She peered behind his shoulder. "Lira? What are you doing here?"

"Lira got captured," Lance said.

Allura frowned. "So Pidge isn't here?"

"No? I told her to go find you and Keith." His smile faded. "Where is Keith?"

"Getting Slav out—it's a long story, I'll tell you on the way back to the castle. We need to find Pidge first. I thought she'd be here, but... which floor was it, that had the scientists?"

"It should be the fourth floor," Lira ventured. "Alongside other prisoners that are aiding the research, typically as test subjects. It's how most Galra prisons are organized. We learn the layouts in the Blades."
"Let's go find her, then," Allura said.

"I can't," Lira said. "I have to go find my Blade. It should be stored somewhere on this floor."

Allura's frown deepened, and her voice rose. "Lira, we don't have time to—"

"I have to get it back. I didn't put protocol encryption back up after we were using it to look for Keith's mother, and it could be hacked for information. It could give away the safe houses of some of the scattered Blades. I can't let that happen."

Allura pinched the bridge of her nose. "Fine. Lira, go with Lance to get the Blade, and then go immediately to the rendezvous point. Turn on your commlink. Keith should be waiting there with the scientist for you. If he's not, radio me. I will go get Pidge myself."

Lira gave her a small smile as they passed. "Thank you, Princess."

Allura softened, and then sighed. It was going to be a long, long day.

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The fourth floor was indeed full of scientists, but that wasn't why Pidge had gone there. Everything had gone horribly wrong, but bringing down the mainframe and making sure the commlink with everyone else was well re-established was still important to the mission. Besides, Keith and Allura had been looking for a scientist, hadn't they? It was as good a place as any now that Lance had gone off to rescue Lira.

The floor was full of beeping noises from below as Pidge crawled through the vents, readying their bayard for when they would drop down. Their best bet was to take out whoever they needed, get to the best computer on the floor, and hack their way in from there. They'd outwitted Sendak in the Castle of Lions. They could do this. They had to.

They waited until the whir of technology faded, and then Pidge unscrewed the bolts of a vent and prepared to drop down. They could hopefully tear open a panel and plug into the mainframe, take it down and get a reading on the adjacent room so they knew what they were getting themselves into before getting into a combat situation. There was no promise of backup here, and while Pidge knew they had improved as a fighter, they were still slight in stature. Bigger, heavier aliens would have no problem with swatting them off like an annoying fly.

What they found, when their feet hit the floor, were cells and owlish eyes framed by long, feathery lashes staring back at them. The two prisoners behind the bronze bars of the cell closest to Pidge were wearing the typical garb of Galra prisoners, but was no denying their unblemished, brown skin with slight feathers, and the wide wings arching out of their backs, even if some only had a wing or less left instead of two full, rich ones.

Pidge had stumbled upon Elyta's captured family. Immediately, they scanned the rows for any sign of the girl, but the black winged warrior was nowhere to be found. Her parents were here, but not the Winged One herself. And here Elyta's parents were, watching them expectantly, curiously. Did they recognize Pidge, the paladin wondered? None of them would have met, the couple here having already been captured before had ever met their daughter or any of their people, but perhaps through stories of Voltron, and Paladins...

"Is Elyta here?" Pidge asked.

"Elyta?" The Winged woman with dark hair and black wings stumbled to her feet. Her left wing had been half plucked. "You know my daughter?"
"She's a friend of mine," Pidge said. They crossed forwards and used their bayard to tear back a panel, and then took a plug out of their arm and connected it. A holoscreen arose over their arm, and they typed rapidly. They'd almost broken into the mainframe before the Galra had caught them, Lance, and Lira. Where were the right symbols? The Galra didn't have a release button, but they did have—there it was!

Pidge pressed the keys tabled Or and then Death. The cell door swung open, and Elyta's family ambled out, but Pidge didn't leave their laptop. They typed rapidly, hacking into a keyword search for SLAV, and accessing the security footage of the scientist's laboratory. The image feed came back, the camera splintered and the empty room smoking. Whether that meant everything had gone okay, Pidge wasn't sure, but things certainly weren't going according to schedule for the Galra. The paladins wouldn't have much time left to get out undetected, and Lira's break-in already would have been reported. They needed to go, fast and light footed.

Pidge glanced at Elyta's parents, who were looking expectantly back at them. There'd be room in the Green Lion for two more passengers, surely.

Now to get into the mainframe and shut it down. Pidge worked their way to the primary database, taking down the firewalls and cracking the remaining encryption they hadn't gotten through the first time as quick as they could. "Once I'm done this," they said, aware the Hootowlings had no idea what was going on, "I'll get you out of here. I just have to make sure my team's okay first."

Their finger was hovering over the key that would shut it down when they saw a strip of code adjoined to a folder labelled Passenger Transcription Records. Fingers flying, Pidge opened it, sirens in their mind blaring. What was the Galra letter for H again? There it was, Holt! Pidge clicked on the name and another folder with a dense encryption—did the Galra know the paladins were linked to their family?—when the sirens turned from being inside their head to blaring outside, too.

Time had run out.

And everyone in the universe had families.

They let the holoscreen with their family's name on it vanish, and hastily wrenched the plugs out of the wall, gesturing to the Hootowlings even as one spare plug and cluster of wires flopped on the floor. "Let's go." They set up their tracker, and it pinged off the remaining signal receiving tower that wasn't directly linked to the mainframe: Lance, Lira, and Keith were already at the rendezvous point. Where was Allura, then?

Pidge helped the Hootowlings into the vents, the safest way back to the rendezvous point near one of the prison towers, and then wiped their eyes.

If it wasn't broke—the vents; their heart—then why fix it?

::::::

"Hold it steady," Hunk instructed, and Shiro held the base of the bayard as still as he could, as Hunk's tongs slowly lowered, goggles strapped over the Yellow Paladin's head. Getting the heated Altean panels into the curve of the bayard, with the panels transformative qualities, was no easy task, and Shiro would've had a burn on his hand if it hadn't been his Galra one that had come too close into contact. Hunk stuck his tongue out on one side as he lowered one panel into the groove they'd carved into the bayard, and then the other. The panels glowed a bright luminescent blue once they settled into the slot, as the two Paladins stood around the table in the Yellow Lion's hangar.

"There," Hunk said, straightening up. "It's not perfect and it won't be able to take any form, but... it's
"I'm sure it's great," Shiro said. The fact that Hunk had done so much in so little time made him marvel at the kid; he'd heard the Garrison hadn't put much stock in Lance or Pidge or Hunk, and the school couldn't have been gone wrong. He'd have to talk to Iverson about remedying it once they got back to Earth.

"You can test it out on the training deck," Hunk said with a smile. "And we can make adjustments from there. For now we should let it cool, though."

Shiro looked down at the Bayard, black with white panels and roughly bigger than Hunk's. The next time he faced Zarkon, he'd have a bayard in his hand. He had earned the Black Lion. But Zarkon had been conquering and killing things for ten thousand years. Shiro hadn't been able to beat him in-hand-to-hand combat in the Astral Plane. When they met again, would he be victorious? In the Galra cruiser, in Zarkon's central command and Haggar's wound at his side, Allura coming to his rescue. Nearly dying on the planet with Keith and the creatures. Getting out by the skin of his teeth because of Ulaz's sacrifice, from the collapsing Blade of Marmora base. Every time in the arena he'd bled to survive.

And even... Shiro touched his wrist. Back on earth, with his diagnosis. He'd seen the records of his body and health in captivity, even if he hadn't been able to read Galra. The witch and her druids had, somehow, cured him. He was an astronaut who'd become a soldier, who'd learned, all too well, how easily people could die.

He'd put off choosing a successor before facing Zarkon in the Astral Plane to give credit to his own likelihood of survival. But once the team returned with Slav, and the Blades became their allies, they'd start moving towards the endgame. A second, just as a precaution, would make sense. Even if it hurt.

And still, Shiro couldn't shake the feeling of borrowed time.

Time. It must've been five vargas by now. Shiro looked at the watch on Hunk's wrist, and did the quick calculations of Earth time to Altean, and his eyes widened. It'd been six.

"They should've been back by now," Shiro said, shooting to his feet, and cued up his commlink. "Coran, can you try and get in contact with Allura and the paladins? They've passed the deadline." Vaguely, in the part of his mind that wasn't consumed with worry, he wondered what the advisor had been doing all this time to not notice it going by.

Coran sounded like he had been crying. "Yes, Shiro."

Shiro looked to Hunk. "Stay here and make sure the Bayard is stable. I'll go to the bridge and see what we can do about getting the others out of Alpha-Traz."

Hunk gave him a slight smile. "I'm sure they're fine, Shiro. They have Allura."

Shiro's heart tightened. Worse than borrowed time was borrowed beats, and he seemed to have too few and both too many when Allura was around. He knew her nature. Knew what she had done for him she would be willing to do for any of them. "Yeah," he said quietly, preparing to turn on his heel and walk to the bridge. "That's what I'm afraid of."

:::

Allura found one plug still keyed up in the wall, and the cell next to it completely empty. How strange. This was where Alpha-Traz kept some of its scientists, wasn't it? But the prison was large,
she thought, her heart sinking as she approached the empty cell. Her shapeshifting had served her well in getting past the outer guards. Was there another heist going on? Had the former prisoners of the cell been executed?

She bent down, ran her thumb over the plug, and then connected her comm to it; her holoscreen cast blue light over her face, and the name HOLT blinked back her. Pidge had been here, then. Was hopefully heading back to the rendezvous point where Keith, Lance, Lira and Briz would be waiting for them.

Allura took out a chip from within her comm panel, connecting it to the plug in the wall after finagling with the entry hole, and started typing. She was no decoder, but... *Access granted.*

The princess smirked. *Gotta.*

:::

Pidge found the boys and Lira waiting for them in the tower, their leg cramping badly; their fall in the vents had affected them more than they'd realized, now that the adrenaline rush was starting to fade. Elyta's parents—her mother, Daya, and father, Wren—clutched at each other's hands as they came to a halt.

"Who are you?" Keith demanded, while Lance grinned in recognition, and the scientist that must've been Slav blinked in interest, eyeing the couple's wings with all three of their eyes.

"Elyta's going to be happy about this," Lance said, clapping Pidge on the shoulder.

"Who?" Lira asked, her Blade strapped to her hip.

But Lance's grin faltered. "Where's Allura?"

Pidge looked at Keith. "I thought she was with you."

Keith's temper rose. "I thought she was with you!" And then, a mutter under his breath, "Quiznak."

"Allura?" Shiro's voice crackled over the comms. "Keith, Lance, Pidge, come in?"

"We're here, Shiro," said Lance. "What is it?"

"You should be coming back to the Castle. Your five hours are up. Are you ready to depart? Coran and I can lay down some cover fire for you."

"Soon," Keith said. "Something came up but we're working on it now. We'll let you know when we're on our way out." He shut off the commlink before Shiro could reply, and turned towards the others. "Pidge, Lance, get to the caves with your Lions and bring everyone else with you. I'm going back to get Allura and will bring Red to me."

Lance's face paled. "I don't think that's smart," he said. "We should all go get Allura and—"

"And risk all of us being captured? The mainframe won't stay down for long. They'll put everything back online, and then I'll be the only one able to access their tech. And Red came for me at the Marmora base. She'll come back for me now, so now I need to go back for Allura." Keith gave Pidge and Lance a glare. "You know Shiro would never forgive us if we let something happen to her."

Pidge piped up, their brow furrowing. "Well yeah, but—"
"You need to get everyone out there. I'll comm both of you when I'm on my way out, okay? Lance, take Lira and the scientist. Pidge, you'll take your... friends. We'll meet in the moon's atmosphere before flying back to the Castle."

Pidge frowned, but nodded, flicking their visor down over the rest of their face. "Okay. Be careful, Keith."

Keith flashed them a quick smile, and then turned and left. Lance watched him go until Pidge nudged him in the ribs, and he snapped in action, taking Lira by the arm and moving over to the scientist and eyeing the egg Briz was carrying. "You're the scientist?"

"Yes."

"Let's get going then." He spared Pidge a look. "See you on the other side, shortstack."

Pidge flipped Lance off, and then they both set off for their different exit points their respective people in tow. Pidge hoped Keith and Allura would be back home soon.

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Allura's comm was fuzzy, as she made her way back to the rendezvous point. She wondered if the others had left the prison yet. It would be the safe thing to do, and the castle would provide cover fire once the team made it back to their Lions. She'd have a tricky time getting out herself, but the mission had gone well overall. They'd gotten what they needed, and she could hide among the guards with shapeshifting until a rescue mission could eventually be staged.

"Allura? Allura!" There was a blur of purple and as she rounded the corner, Keith smacked right into her. She swerved out of the way and caught him by the arm so he wouldn't go tumbling onto the floor, and stared at him with wide eyes as he righted himself.

"We got Pidge," he wheezed, catching his breath. "I've sent the others out. C'mon, if we get to the tallest tower, I can call Red to me. She'll come."

"You shouldn't have come back," Allura told him, even as they jogged down the hallway towards the tower together.

"I had to," Keith said tersely. "Or Shiro would've raised hell, and—we're part of a team, princess. That means we all come back for each other."

She softened. "I guess it does."

:::

They got halfway to the Blue Lion before things went to shit. Lance and Lira sprinted towards the cave where the Blue Lion was hidden, but it was a long distance and the scientist was slow. "Come on," Lira hissed, hauling the scientist up by their shoulders and trying to get the to go faster, but it was no use. The guards from one of the prison's watch towers had spotted them, and they wouldn't make it to the cave in time.

Lance stopped running and squared his shoulders, and Lira passed him by only a few meters before she turned around to yell at him. "What you doing?"

"Get behind me," he hollered, and drew up his paladin shield as the first blaster fire rained down on them. His feet slid backwards, his shield having never taken so many blasts at one before, and Lira put her hands on his shoulders to push back against him and steady him.
"We can't stay here like this," she panted. Stranded halfway between the prison and the cave, on a flat plain of reddish dirt, was no place to be. It was only a matter of time before the prison would dispatch a ground team to come capture them.

"Take the scientist to the Blue Lion. She should let you in. I'll hold them off."

Lira stepped away, and Lance heard her swallow hard and thought she'd listen, when she glared at him. "No." Her eyes flickered up to the tower. "Cover me."

She slung her body out from behind him before Lance could stop it, her mask shimmering over her face she cracked it off and hurled the disk as hard as she could. The mask sailed in an arc, light enough to be lifted by wind, and crashed into one of the gunners like a boomerang, before Lance pulled her back behind him, a scorch mark where she had been standing as another gunner readied their rifle. Lira may have done something, but it was clear she was out of ideas.

"Blue," he managed, reaching out to his Lion's energy. The distant sound of water. "Please."

They heard the roar of the Lion before she landed, her paws caging them in and wind whipping at Lira's hair as she roared, and her tail blaster fired at the tower; the structure crumbled. The Blue Lion lowered her head and opened her mouth, and Lance waited until Lira and the scientist were inside before following. He patted the Lion's board affectionately once he got settled into his chair.

"Thanks beautiful," he said. "Knew I could always count on you."

"I have to admit," Lira said slowly, shoulders drawn tight in the cockpit; he knew she hadn't liked riding over in the Blue Lion the first time, being Galra and all, "your Lion's pretty incredible."

"Thanks." Lance readied his controls and flicked on the commlink. He'd call Keith once he got the chance, make sure the mullet and princess were doing okay. "Now let's blow this popsicle stand!"

"—Lance, come in!"

He froze as the commlink button glowed. Shit. Shiro sounded pissed. Cautiously, Lance let the comm expand to a holoscreen, revealing Coran and Shiro's displeased faces on the other side. "Oh, hey, guys—what's up—"

"Lance, where is Allura?" Shiro demanded. "I've been trying to comm her and Keith and I can't get through. We checked the Red Lion's sensors and they're not there. Where are they?"

"Her comm is broken and Keith's is turned off," Lance said. "Allura, uh, kinda got separated from the rest of us, so Keith went back to get her. They should be coming out soon!"

Coran's face whitened. "You let—"

Lira pointed over Lance's chair. "Look."

Lance grinned as his gaze veered towards the tallest tower of the prison, where the Red Lion perched atop it, her yellow eyes blazing. Keith's comm scratched to life. "Got the princess. We're all ready to go, Shiro. Lay down the cover fire."

"We are talking about this when you all get back," Shiro said, but Coran left the screen to go commandeer the castle.

It wouldn't be long now.
Keith put the Red Lion on autopilot once they careened out of the moon's atmosphere, and joined her in the back room of the Lion's head. It was a short, maybe six tick long fly to the Castleship. "Hey."

Allura looked up, her helmet in her hands. She'd discarded the rest of her Galra disguise, so she wasn't sure why she couldn't let this go. The chip with the Holt family's information was tucked into a discreet pocket of her uniform. "You said that Shiro would have raised hell, if I'd been left behind. What..." She turned the helmet over in her hands. "What did you mean?"

Keith's dark brows rose. "He's never told you?"

"Told me what?"

Keith's brow pinched, and he sighed. "I think that's something for Shiro to tell you," Keith said. "Ask him about it... when you get the time."

Allura smiled grimly. "It always feels like there's not enough of it, doesn't it?" This mission had been no exception after all.

His shoulders hunched. "Yeah. It does."

Her brow furrowed. "Coran never came to speak with you, did he?"

Keith looked away. "It doesn't matter. He can hate me all he wants. I mean, I get it. The Galra are messed up. Zarkon was a paladin and he still betrayed you, I just..."

Allura wondered if Shiro had spoken to Keith the same way he'd spoken to her. It seemed like something her Black Paladin would do. "Coran will come around," she promised. "I already have. I promise, once we have the time, I'll do all I can to help you find your mother." She glanced at the chip in her hands. "Everyone deserves to have their family back."

The Lion touched down in the Castle's Red Lion hangar, and Allura found both Shiro and Coran waiting for them. Coran embraced them, and then took one tumultuous look at Keith—"You brought her back safely," he said hoarsely, his mustache twitching—before he picked the boy up in a bone crushing hug.

Allura hugged Shiro perhaps a few seconds too long, but he didn't pull away until she did, his arms warm around her waist, until Coran set Keith down, looking nervously pleased and a little overwhelmed. "Yeah well," Keith said, massaging his side, "I didn't want anyone to go making stupid decisions." He glanced at Shiro, who bristled, but Coran merely smiled.

"Brizo and the Hootowlings Pidge picked up have been settled," he reported, "and Lance, Lira, Pidge, and Hunk are all on the bridge. Tired, but ready for their next orders, princess."

"Tell them to rest for a few vargas," Allura said. "We need to recuperate and then comm the Blades. Although..." Her fingers curled over the chip. "I have something to give to Pidge first. Shiro, would you like to come with me to the bridge? I expect you're tired as well."

"Oh." He glanced between her, and then Coran and Keith. "Right. Thank you, princess."

It was in the hallway to the bridge that Allura noticed the creases in Shiro's brow weren't fading away like she'd expected. Was he worried about the conversation they were leaving behind? About how poorly the mission had almost gone? Or something else entirely? She laid her hand on his arm and brought him to a halt. "Shiro?"
"I've been thinking," he said slowly, not looking at her, which only made her heart sink lower. "The bayard Hunk made for me is great, but... I couldn't defeat Zarkon in the Astral Plane. Black had to save me. When I come up against him again, what if I lose?"

Her fingers on his arm tightened, even as she kept her voice calm; Shiro hadn't told her that much, before. "What are you getting at?" she asked softly.

His lips flattened into a hard line. "I should have a successor. Just in case."

She let out a breath, and then stepped closer. "Shiro, nothing is going to happen to you."

He finally turned towards her. "But if it does—"

Allura reached up and took his face in her hands. Her thumbs brushed the edges of his nose scar, as she lightly stroked the curves of his cheeks. "Nothing is happening to you," she repeated. "I won't let it. You know that."

He softened, and some of the cloudiness in his eyes faded. He leaned into her touch. "I know."

She wanted to kiss him, she realized, and slowly retracted her hands. She couldn't let a distraction like that get in the way now. *War steals all the time we have far quicker than we think it will*, Coran had said. Allura shook herself straight. They'd have a little more time.

She knew it.

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Keith couldn't berate Shiro and Allura for leaving him alone with Coran, but that didn't mean he liked it. Sudden hugs were always interesting, and now it was awkward, looking at Coran and waiting for him to say something. Up until a day ago, hadn't Coran hated him? And then Coran's watery blue gaze found Keith's eyes, and he stepped forward as though reading his mind.

"I never hated you," Coran said quietly. His mustache twitched and he wiped his eyes. "I was afraid. I trusted Zarkon. He and Alfor loved each other as brothers. I never thought I would go through that again, and I took my fear out on you. I'm sorry."

"I get it," Keith said. "I mean, it sucked—and I'm glad you've changed your mind, obviously but... I know when Allura first got captured, I didn't handle it properly. But we're all a team now, so... I will never be like Zarkon. I promise."

Coran's eyes crinkled. "I know. But... my whole conundrum made me realize I don't actually know that much about you, so..." Coran sat down on the Red Lion's paw and patted the space beside him. "Tell me about yourself. You lived in the desert, didn't you? Did you have fiery rain like back on Altea? Lance has told me that's unusual for Earth weather."

Keith puffed out a slight laugh, and then sat down to him. "No, but it was hot. And kinda boring. Fiery rain might've made things more interesting, actually." Keith smiled at him. "How about this? You tell me one thing about Altea, and I tell you one thing about Earth."

Coran's mustache curved upwards. "Deal."

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Pidge embraced her on the bridge, once Allura held out the chip and the Green Paladin recognized it. "You said you were going to get your father back," Allura said with a small smile, and Shiro by her
"I wanted for it to be true." She cradled the back of Pidge's head, as the girl's small shoulders shook, before Pidge pulled away, wiping her face and taking the chip.

"Thank you, princess," Pidge said. Her eyes were shining. "You don't know what this means."

"Hey, alright," Lance exclaimed, wrapping an arm around Pidge's shoulders. "Congrats. Now with Slav, and the Galra are defeated, you can be the best little sis, and we can go looking for your brother and pops in no time."

Pidge wormed her way out of Lance's grip. "There is..." She fiddled with her glasses, suddenly nervous. "Something I should tell the rest of you. Keith and Coran already know, and it's not that I didn't want to tell the rest of you, but—I'm nonbinary."

"Oh." Lance blinked. "Okay, cool, great. What pronouns do you want us to use, if they've changed?"

Hunk beamed and placed a hand on Pidge's shoulder. "I'm proud of you for figuring it out. Especially with everything else going on."

"Thanks Hunk—" Pidge leaned over towards Lance. "And I think I'd like they/them pronouns for now. It's what fits better." Pidge looked to Allura. "Coran actually really helped me figure it out, with the Altean concept of nibiru."

Allura smiled widely, and comprehension and then a smiled dawned on Lira's face. "It's a simple enough translation," Allura said happily. "Congratulations Pidge. Self discovery is always hard won."

Shiro smiled down at Pidge. "And every time someone steps up and says who they are, the world becomes a better, more interesting place, so thank you."

Pidge leaned up and hugged him around the middle. "Thanks Shiro," they said, their voice muffled. Once they pulled away, Shiro turned to Allura.

"You should go rest, princess. I'll go talk to our new guests."

And for once, she didn't feel like debating it with him. She needed to be fresh and ready for negotiations with the Blades, and she'd need to do it alone.

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"—we can begin our construction of a new base and teladuv on Olkarion," Allura finished saying, "if you think that you can be there with enough Blades in a short enough amount of time."

Kolivan remained stone faced on her holoscreen, but he jerked his head in a tiny nod. "I'll start sending out the signals to the other Blades. We have never partnered with the Olkari before, but if your assessment of their skills is correct, then they will be worthy allies. Dylak willing, we can strike a mighty blow against the Galra within the year."

"However," Allura bargained, "there is one thing I might ask of you."

She saw Kolivan and a masked Antok exchange an unreadable glance, before Kolivan nodded back at her. "If it is within our power," he said slowly. "We will do so. You ensured Lira's survival. My brother would not want to lose her."

It was moment like this that made her more glad than ever that she was alone on the bridge, and had
managed to convince Shiro to get some well earned rest. Allura took a deep breath and set her gaze. There were a million things she could ask for. Insurance that her political power would not be taken away in their partnership. Complete and continued control over Voltron. That the Olkari would remain her allies, and theirs by extension. Supplies, resources, names, charts and locations of Blade bases. Anything in the universe really, if they won the war and the Blades took control of the Galra empire to help ease it into peace.

Anything, or...

"Shiro's survival. That is what I need guaranteed, from you."

Kolivan's eyebrows rose slightly. "The Black Paladin? He matters that much to you?"

She didn't flinch, and better, didn't flush. "Yes."

Kolivan frowned deeply, and although he didn't turn fully enough to look at Antok, his eyes darted in his partner's direction for a moment, and she thought perhaps the commander understood. "Very well. If we can ensure the Black Paladin's survival in whatever plans we make going forward to fell Zarkon, we will do so to our fullest extent. If that is all?"

She nodded. "Until Olkarion."

"We shall meet again, princess," Kolivan said.

The absence of his holoscreen left no reprieve, and her chest felt only marginally lighter. There was still so much work left to be done. But at least one important matter had been settled. Allura left the room alone.
The Castle had barely finished its day cycle before they touched down on Olkarion, Allura's wormhole a fading blimp of blue in the sun coloured sky. The newly crowned Ryner was waiting for them as Shiro and Allura led the team down the disembarkment ramp of the Castleship, with Brizo, Elyta's parents, and Lira in tow.

Ryner shook Allura's hand in greeting. "It is good to see you again, princess."

Allura smiled and let go, and then looked to Shiro, her smile softening. "Thank you again, Your Majesty, for allowing us to create a base here. We are not quite sure of the nature of it, but you are treasured allies of Voltron. We look forward to working with you more closely in the immediate future."

Ryner shook Shiro's hand next. "Of course. We must all band together in the fight against the Galra."

The queen glanced over their shoulders and eyed Lira, who wasn't listening to Keith and Lance's bickering, and kept fiddling with the side of her blue armour collar; there were no extra masks for Mamora members, although Shiro wasn't sure how her mask had been destroyed in the first place, although she assumed it'd been in Alpha-Traz. "And the Blades of Marmora, you called it?"

"Yes," Shiro swooped in. "You spoke with their Commander, Kolivan?"

"Kolivan of the House of Maala, yes," Ryner confirmed. The name Maala sounded familiar for some reason, but Shiro couldn't place why. Perhaps it was a common alien surname, and he'd heard it in the arenas? There must have been captured Blades in the gladiator pits. "He... was an interesting man."

"I can imagine," Shiro murmured dryly under his breath, and Allura had to hold back the most undignified snort, before he raised his voice back to his usual tenure. "Do you mind if we start unloading our supplies, Your Majesty?"

"Not at all. I can have some Olkarion assist you—?"

"There isn't that much," Shiro assured her, and glanced back at the boys. Hunk had soothed Lance and Keith, who were scowling and set apart from each other. Pidge was looking wonderstruck at the architecture around them, beautiful and built in the months since the Paladins had been on the planet, while Lira remained distracted. "It'll be good for them to do a bit of hard labour."

Allura swatted him lightly on the armour once Ryner had bade them goodbye to tend to other matters.
like making sure where they were staying for the night was wholly sufficient). The princess was smiling, though. "You were a terrible big brother to Keith, weren't you?" she said fondly.

Shiro gave her a cheeky grin. "Perhaps."

Team Voltron collected the things they wanted from their rooms in woolen sacks Coran had pulled out of a dusty storage unit in the Castle, and they had made double trips back to help one another get the rest of their belongings, particularly the heavier things (Pidge had a robot prototype they'd be tinkering with in their spare time) to where Ryner had set up stock for them. Shiro had the fewest belongings, but the bayard Hunk had constructed for him weighed like lead as Shiro set it down in his new quarters, a gleaming and low set sunny-stoned building close to Ryner's new palace.

He'd barely had time to think of what he'd said to Allura, but he knew it was true. He needed a successor. But who to pick, he wasn't sure. For Black Paladin, Allura would be a natural fit, but she already carried so much weight on her shoulders; he didn't want to add to it. Hunk was a rather good leader, level headed, but Shiro didn't know how well he'd do under strenuous situations. He'd gotten better about panicking, but… And Pidge, flat out, was too young.

"Shiro?" There was a knock at his doorway, and the wooden door swung lightly open to reveal Lira. "We're all regrouping in the main room. The princess asked me to let you know."

"Oh." Shiro willed his bayard to vanish, impressed once again at Hunk's understanding of Altean tech that it did so, and would reappear when he willed it. "Thanks." He flashed the girl a quick smile and followed her out into the hallway.

She kept fidgeting with the side of her collar, and Shiro softened his voice. "Is something wrong?"

Lira's hand fell and her gaze snapped up. "What? Oh, no. I just—"

"You lost your mask in Alpha-Traz?"

"Yes." Her eyes stared at the cream white tiles in front of them, as they walked down the arched hallway with wide windows lining the walls. The Olkari loved natural lighting, apparently. "It feels strange," Lira admitted. "I am not usually unmasked for so long. Or at least, without the option of it."

"Sometimes it's okay to be unmasked," Shiro said. "It makes you more recognizable."

"The Blades pride ourselves on anonymity."

"I never would have survived the arenas if I'd remained anonymous." Shiro glanced at her. "Your uncle was a very brave man, and I owe him my life and freedom twice over. I won't forget his sacrifice."

Lira tugged on the ends of her hair instead, her mouth a deep frown, but her eyes lifted slightly. "Thank you. I… I wish I knew whether one of my… friends was alright, too. He was the one stationed in Ulaz's place at the Emperor's central command, and I—I wish I knew if he was alright."

"If all goes well, we'll be taking the fight to Zarkon's central command soon enough," Shiro said. "I'm sure your friend will be alright. If your commander trusted him with such an important mission, he must be a very talented Blade."

"Yeah." Lira let go of her hair. She looked a little older, suddenly. "He is."

They were silent as they walked into the main room. It was an observation deck that overlooked the central part of the Olkari's new city, with rising, low-slung homes, landing pads, and a few
skyscrapers. The windows were from floor to ceiling, with lounge couches surrounding a long, oval table polished to a shine that had a holographer planted in the middle that could bring up holoscreens at will. Lance was already spread out on one of the couches, his legs hooked over the armrest and his head in Hunk's lap. Pidge and Keith were sitting on another couch with Coran chatting merrily between them, until Shiro and Lira sat down on the final couch, and Allura clasped her hands together and cleared her throat as she remained standing.

She pressed the bottom of the holographer, and a holoscreen sprang up. It looked like a map of the city, and the forest dwellings crowding the corners. "As you know," she began, "the Olkari are still busy and their city is well under construction now that the Galra occupation has been ended. I expect us all to use our abilities to aid them in whatever way we can. In the meantime, we shall be building our own base here. As we gain more allies, we will need a place to house them—especially as many species, such as the Taujeerians, have been displaced from their homes. In addition, we will be helping the Blades of Marmora build a new base that they will seal away once it is ready. Lira, you've spoken with Kolivan?"

"He and the Blades that he and Antok have been able to collect so far will be touching down in a quintant," Lira affirmed. "More will follow once news of a safe haven spreads."

Allura nodded. "Good. For now, you're all dismissed to rest. There is not much to do but prepare for the fight ahead, once the Blades have arrived and the next stage of planning can go through. Pidge, I expect you'll be finding your friend Elyta?"

"Yes," Pidge said. Shiro said they'd gotten Elyta's parents settled in one of the guest rooms, and had already sent a transmission to Hootowling the night cycle before. Briz still had to be fully dealt with, but for now the scientist was sleeping and eating as much as possible, let into the Altean pool in the castleship, and never going too far from their egg.

Allura gave another nod. "Alright. Everyone is dismissed, except Coran. A word?"

Shiro raised his brows—it was unusual for Allura to tell Coran something and not him as well—but perhaps it was a more private matter, or something that didn't concern him. Either way, Shiro let it go, even if he glanced back as he followed the Paladins out of the room until Pidge nudged him.

"We were going to find the new sparring deck," they said, the four paladins and Lira looking expectantly. Keith, surprisingly, didn't look very excited for a fight. "You could try out your new Bayard."

"Yeah!" said Lance. "You could teach me some cool moves."

Shiro's worries ebbed. "Yeah, of course, sharpshooter. Let's go."

:::

"So," said Coran, once the team's footsteps had faded, "what did you wish to speak with me about?"

"There is something I saw in the Weblum," Allura began slowly, and Coran walked over to stand closer to her. She kept her back to him and her gaze towards the horizon, although she could tell she wasn't taking any of the view in. "That I did not wish to tell you until we had proper time to process it. I still do not know quite what to make of it myself…"

"Princess?" said Coran cautiously, stepping up so he stood beside her as they overlooked Olkarion.

"I saw a Galra pod that had been swallowed by the Weblum; it had someone inside. I opened it, and… their armour was strange. I didn't lose my bike like I told you. The stranger stole it. Their suit
bore a white vulture. I didn't realize why it looked familiar until they were gone. Coran... I think they were Princess Merla of the Galra Empire.

Allura turned to face him, and could see a million thoughts running through his mind, and now she could finally voice the ones that had been running through hers. "I never thought she had survived all this time, with her sickness, and the state of her people. But—we've been fighting the Galra for eight months now. How have we now heard of the Empire's surviving first born heir, much less how has she survived and why there hasn't been a search for her if she was lost in a Weblum and—Coran, please say something."

Coran slowly eased back onto the nearest sofa, and sat on the armrest, his head bowed and his voice quiet. "It appears your father's suspicions about the princess were more than correct," he said gravely.

Allura stopped, and looked at him. "Suspicious? Merla was sick."

"Did you never stop to consider the cause of her sickness?" Coran said, lifting his head.

"It was taboo to ask. You and Father made that quite clear."

"Do you remember the years that you and Merla were separated, during your adolescence?"

"I remember. She went to train with the druids. I learned diplomacy."

"Your father feared she was conducting dark alchemic experiments, even in her youth, and guided somewhat by her mother. He never had enough proof to merit further inquiry; he never wanted a war. But you've learned the signs of dark magic. You know how it poisons the body."

She thought of Fala Morigin, and how she'd wasted away. Her Aunt Honerva's deteriorating state before the Rift. Before she'd shunned her Altean name and taken only her Galra one.

"But then how would Merla have survived all this time?" Allura asked, as her brain attempted to jam puzzle pieces together. It didn't seem possible that the pale, fresh-faced girl she'd known in her youth could conduct experiments so horrible they had been outlawed by Altean law. But then again, Allura's mother and aunt had taken a risk with accepting Haggar on Altean soil, with the bloodline she had: a direct descendant of Fala Morigin. What else had anyone expected?

"I suppose then," Coran said grimly, "that her experiments worked. Perhaps her family has not looked for her because she has made a play for the throne, for power. She likely expected to be Empress by now, not for her father to live forever. Still, perhaps she's the one keeping him alive. Perhaps he cannot craft a search party and reveal his weakness."

"Then... where do we go from here?"

"I don't know." Coran's mustache twitched, and he inclined his head to her in the way she'd only see him do for her father. "Where do we go from here, princess?"

Her chest constricted, and Allura's forehead creased under her circlet. "We find out what we can of Merla," she said, thinking hard. "Whatever we can. But we do not worry of it. It can be a concern for once Zarkon is defeated." She raised her head. "And we do not tell the Blades."

Whether the Blade of Marmora knew of Merla or not, it didn't matter. Allura didn't like the idea of letting them know a powerful witch was possibly on the prowl after being gone for who knew how long. They didn't seem the type to shy away from assassination, and for now, Allura wanted the other princess alive, if only to get answers. And besides Coran, Merla was the one trace of Altea left
that may not have been corrupted beyond repair. Merla had never seemed malicious. Maybe her father's suspicions had been wrong; he'd been wrong about Zarkon, after all.

Or maybe that was wishful thinking—a child's line of thinking, as she'd been a child when she'd known her—and she would have to let it go, like the lullabies and songs of her people that no one sung, anymore.

"Of course, princess," said Coran. "And the paladins?"

Her throat tightened. She had a feeling Coran knew what her answer would be before she said it. "Only Shiro. And only if it's necessary. I do not want to burden him further unless we must."

Coran nearly smiled. "Of course, princess. Is that all?"

"Yes. I'll draw up my plans for when the Blades arrive on my own. Make sure the Paladins are tended to."

"I will," Coran promised, and lingered by the door. "Princess?"

She turned to face him. "Yes, Coran?"

"I hope you know that the trials you face are unlike anything your father did. You face a greater task than either of your parents ever did. I hope you know how proud they would be, of the leader you're becoming. Of the queen."

Allura smiled thinly. "Thank you, Coran."

It was times like these she wished her parents could see it, too.

:::

Kolivan didn't look impressed as he disembarked from the Blades' ship two days later in Olkarion, but Shiro supposed he never looked impressed about anything. Antok was with him, masked as always, and Lira seemed to just keep herself from fidgeting as she looked up at her Commander. Did he know she'd gone on a mission without her permission? What was the penalty for that sort of thing, anyway?

But Kolivan merely grunted and remained stone faced. "You lost your mask, Astero."

Lira bowed her head and swallowed hard. "Yes Commander."

"We'll have to waste resources making a new one for you," said Kolivan. "Do not lose it again. You can help make up for it by aiding us in unloading our cargo."

"Yes." But Lira smiled once he'd passed to shake Allura's hand, and went to do just that. Clearly, that was as much of a I'm-glad-you're-alive conversation Kolivan was capable of giving.

The Commander shook Shiro's hand next, once he'd greeted Queen Ryner. "Champion."

Shiro held back a wince and forced a smile, glad when Kolivan let go. "Commander."

"We can escort you to where the scaultrite has been stored," said Allura. "For your new base. The scientist of Slav, Brizo, has already set up their new laboratory. Whatever questions you have for them, I'm sure they'll be willing to answer."

"Very well," Kolivan said, and Antok followed close behind as the other Blades were ushered in by
Ryner and her immediate advisors.

The scaultrite had been stored in a silo of sorts, tall and a glistening gold that shone in the sun. Kolivan saw the sack of scaultrite Allura had procured, and nodded. "It'll do," he said gruffly, and they moved onto Brizo's lab.

The scientist was wheeling away with some wires in their lab on the second floor of Queen Ryner's newly finished palace. The whole room, which like most of the others in the palace, had been rather barren with wide windows, but Briz had wholly taken over it. A watery incubator had been set up, and the blue egg floated in the middle of it.

"Briz," Allura said, "these are the Blades of Marmora. They're the ones that sent us to rescue you."

Briz raised their flat face from their wire work, their black curls no longer unkempt, but still framing their pale blue cheeks. "Ah, yes. Rebellion of the Galra." They toddled over, two hands wringing anxiously even as they shook Kolivan's hand with one of their remaining palms.

Kolivan eyed the egg warily. "An old Galran project?"

Briz moved over to the incubator. "They wanted me to construct an artificial Voltron, a prototype of a Lion, but they did not understand enough to know if I was truly listening. This is my pride and joy," they corrected. "Spawella. She's based off a species of space whale from my home planet."

Kolivan pinched the bridge of his nose, and Antok seemed to hold back a snort, muffled by his mask. "Instead of a weapon, you brought a space whale with you?"

Briz's third eye widened questioningly, as though they didn't understand the inquiry. "Yes. But Princess Allura has already notified me that you will need weapons and such to bring down the Galra. I will be happy to help, if I may return to my homeworld afterwards. I've already made new blueprints for guns." They reached into a barrel near the incubator and tapped a holopad; a 3D model of a gun showed up, with stats next to it. Twice the fire power of normal blasters.

Kolivan's frown lessened. "I suppose it's acceptable," he said stiffly. "But I have a greater task in mind for you. Expect a notification once the Blades and Voltron have agreed on our next strike against the Empire." He jerked his head towards Allura. "Princess."

They exited the room with Antok and Shiro following behind, as Briz happily and absentmindedly muttered to themselves about wires and oceans and trigger timings before the door swished close.

"So," the princess said, once they had re-entered the paladins' new briefing room. "What is this task you have in mind for our new scientist?"

Kolivan frowned deeply, but nodded and Antok strode forward and set a device on the table. A hologram of a wide arch and the Castleship to scale, looking positively tiny, sprang up. "I figured if the Blades are already working with one flawed Altean invention, we might as well work with another. Your people built teladuvs, did they not?"

"Alongside the Balmerans," Allura confirmed, her eyes wide. It was only with a shipload of their crystals that creating a functioning and stable teladuv was possible—that, and the alchemy of ten powerful Alteans. "I assume that's who you got it from?"

"News of your narrow escape at Zarkon's central command spread quickly," Kolivan said. "And the Lions were not seen anywhere until Taujeer. Other fighters reached out to contact us. This was sent by a young Balmeran named Shay. She said she knows you?"
Shiro smiled broadly. "Yes, she does." They'd have to tell Hunk later.

"I take it that neither you nor your advisor has ever built a teladuv before?" Antok said, his voice soft but jagged under his mask.

"No," Allura admitted. That had never been seen as a princess' job. "But Coran is a skilled mechanic. He will need help, though."

"Which is why we know have Brizo," Kolivan said.

The corners of Allura's mouth twitched. "Does that mean we're your allies now then?" Had they had all this planned even before Voltron had gone to Alpha-Traz? They must have. Well, perhaps Kolivan was better at his job than he let on.

"I suppose it does," Kolivan said, and his eyes glinted with something less hard. He held out his hand, and Allura took it.

Allura let a bold grin spread over her face. For the first time since waking from the cryopod, the end of the war felt possible. Tangible, and almost within her reach. Perhaps once it was settled, she could even reach for—

"Let us take down Zarkon," she said, "together."

(Merla notwithstanding, of course.)

:::

The Hootowlings came in the morning. Allura helped the process along, with a bit of wormholing, and Pidge wrung their hands together as they waited with the team and Elyta's parents on the Olkari's docking bay. Daya and Wren were holding each other's hands; Daya's left wing had been bandaged, so the plucked skin could heal. Pidge hoped Elyta hadn't met a similar fate in the search for her family these past couple of months.

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Elyta limped out first. Her right leg was bandaged below the knee, and her choppy black hair had been cropped closer to her head against her warm brown skin and her arching black wings were full and intact. A blaster, instead of her sword, was strapped to her hip along with a dagger. But then her gaze lifted and found her parents, and she ran.

She reached her parents first, and they wrapped their arms around each other, wings and elbows brushing, and sank onto their knees with a sob, not letting go. Pidge knew it must have been a good deal of time before they did, but it felt like no time at all. The paladin knew it would feel the same when they finally held their family again; even an hour-long hug would feel like nothing compared to the eternity of a day without them.

Still, Pidge smiled when Elyta stepped towards them, and hugged next. Elyta's feathers tickled their chin.

"Thank you," Elyta whispered thickly.

Pidge hugged her back. "Anytime."
"I promise," Elyta said, pulling away and wiping at her face, "I will help you find your family, somewhere in these stars."

Pidge's smile grew. Stars were in their eyes. "I know."

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Kolivan had barely settled in the quarters of his ship that night before Lira barged in. "Astero," he said, scowling. "What are you—"

"Why didn't you tell me Uncle Thace had stopped responding?"

Kolivan rose from his bunk. Ah. Antok must have let it slip to her. "How was I supposed to? You were off cavorting with Voltron. And he has not stopped responding. He's simply changed it from video feeds to encrypted code. It's standard protocol."

"It's protocol for when things are starting to go wrong," Lira hissed. "If you're not willing to send someone to get him out of central command, then I'll go. I'm not a child anymore, Kolivan, you can't expect me to believe that things are okay—"

Kolivan towered over her, and then placed a hand, softly, on her shoulder. "Thace has not asked to be pulled out," he said firmly, but not coldly. "I know you miss your uncle. I know you are worried about losing another. But my brother will come home. He has you to fight for, after all."

Lira deflated, her face burning. "Kolivan," she said slowly, sniffling hard. "Do you remember all the people you've lost?"

"Every one."

Lira lifted her face. "How do you do it?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Some days, I do not know."

Lira's eyes darted to the blade strapped to his hip. "Kolivan. The Red Paladin's blade… it looked similar to the kind your sister had." She flinched when his gaze landed on her, after an impossibly silent moment of baited breath, as though prepared for him to berate her for overstepping, when Kolivan's frown returned, but sadder, this time.

"He is Orilla's son," he confirmed. "And bears her Blade."

"Then why don't you tell him?"

Kolivan let go of the girl's shoulder. "He clearly did not know her. He doesn't know our ways. He is no kin of mine."

Lira pursed her lips, and stepped away. "If I had family left," she said with a downward tug to her mouth, "I would tell them. No matter what." She turned towards the door. "Goodnight, Commander."

A crease formed in Kolivan's brow. "Goodnight, Lira."

::::::

The construction site for the Teladuv was a wide, open pavilion ringed with corridors that would make the transportation of materials easy, and settling into life on Olkarion was even easier. Shiro could tell the team liked the planet, now that they were used to their new base with the Castleship.
moored nearby. They all still went on missions, of course—covering fleeing Blades as more stragglers heard of a haven, answering distress signals—and it was still home, but it was clear having a real night and day cycle instead of a simulated one was improving their spirits.

That, and there was actual downtime in between busy days of lifting and loading cargo with their Lions, laughing and sparring in the training deck, trying new Olkarion dishes. They took their Lions out for flights and brought home flowers grown with the Olkari’s powered flower crowns. In the one afternoon off Shiro had been able to convince Allura to take over the last two weeks, she'd taught the paladins how to make flower crowns.

And yet, the war went on.

More Hootowlings had followed Elyta as well, joining the Olkari and Taujeerians that were lending resources to the teladuv in labour and metal. Lira went off on missions with the Blades and hadn't touched down in weeks, once she'd left the team with some handshakes from the Paladins, a courteous smile from Coran, and a high five from Lance she hadn't fully understood.

The teladuv would take three months to build and be made operational, Allura had told them, and Shiro bided his time. He practiced with his new bayard and helped Hunk made accommodations. He trained Lance and Pidge in hand to hand combat and watched them wrestle each other on the training deck until it dissolved into tickle fights. He mapped out charts with Coran and saw him and Keith go off to see if they could find any more of Coran's recording cubes in the Olkarion market. He planned and drank coffee with Allura, smiled at her when she wasn't looking despite himself, and convinced himself that any sign of her smiles at him lingering was just wishful thinking.

And there was no place for wishful thinking in war. Not when, so often, his weaknesses had almost meant her death.

:::

It was a peculiar thing to be standing alone with Commander Kolivan the next day. Allura had gone to escort Briz to the teladuv (the scientist was reluctant to leave their egg for any amount of time, and always needed reassurance to do so) and had promised to be back in a few ticks, leaving Shiro standing in awkward silence with Kolivan. Then again, the guy was always silent. Perhaps he didn't mind it.

Or maybe he did, because Kolivan spoke a few seconds later. "I'm sure your team understands that now that the Blades are better situated, and we have docked with you, that we've also come to re-collect Lira."

"Oh," Shiro turned away from the windows to look at him. "Right. Well I'm sure she'll be happy. She's wanted to get back to you guys for a while."

"The other Blades were hesitant to join you," Kolivan said, not looking back at him. "Even the ones that came with me. She gave quite a rousing speech in the team's favour."

Shiro smiled slightly. "Well, that's quite nice of her."

"It's why she can't stay. She's being sent to the Karthulian System, to get her head on straight."

"I don't see what's so wrong with a child having people she cares for."

"She's been unmasked for too long, Shiro," said Kolivan. He sounded almost weary. "It's dangerous, for our kind."
Shiro stepped closer. "I've hardly ever seen you with your mask on."

Kolivan finally turned towards him. His face was like stone. "I never take it off." He glanced away. "She will be permitted to say a proper goodbye to the paladins, however, before she's sent on her mission."

"Thank you—"

"There is something I wished to ask of you." A crack formed in Kolivan's face for the first time. Nervousness? "I wish to speak to the Red Paladin privately, but I am unsure a direct request from myself would be welcome. Could you tell him for me?"

"Is it about his family?" Shiro asked. Or worse. Kolivan couldn't be thinking about trying to turn Keith into a Blade, could he?

"I believe I have information he would appreciate," Kolivan said.

Shiro's brow knitted together, but he nodded. "I'll make sure he speaks with you then."

Sure enough, Shiro stuck to his word and found Keith cooking with Hunk once the meeting was over; they were making some kind of Olkarion cookies that looked similar to earth ones, but that were green and more leafy instead.

"Kolivan wants to speak to you," Shiro said. "I think it's about your family." Keith's eyes widened, and he shied away even as he stepped forward. Shiro placed a hand on his shoulder. "I guess you really made up for things, with all your good work at Alpha-Traz. Getting everyone out safely and all." Especially Allura.

Keith brightened ever so slightly.

"Yeah," said Hunk, coming up on his other side with a gentle grin. "I'm sure it'll all be okay. Whatever it is, at least you'll have answers. And maybe it's not even about your family. Maybe it's about your mad fighting skills, or something. You could teach a class." He turned to Shiro. "Does the Blade of Marmora have classes?"

Shiro chuckled, and it coaxed a smile out of Keith. "You'll have to ask Lira," he said, and squeezed Keith's shoulder before he let go. "Go on. We'll be right here when you get back."

Keith's smile turned nervous, but it didn't fade. "Okay."

:::

"Do you know of the House of Maala?"

Keith listened as the doors closed behind him, and stepped forwards towards Kolivan in the empty bridge, the commander's back to him. "It's your House, isn't it?" he said slowly. "Your clan."

"Yes. I come from a long line of Yurak Galran generals. A revered bloodline." Kolivan turned towards him. The bridge lay between them. "A bloodline you share."

Keith's head snapped in alarm. "What?"

"The Blade you carry was once my younger sister's," Kolivan said. "Orilla Maala. She was strong willed and fierce. She went missing, close to twenty years ago, during a brief time in between missions. We were never able to figure out where she had gone—somewhere beyond our known
galaxy, and the Empire's reach. But it seems she made her way to your Earth, and had you."

"She left," Keith said, swallowing hard. "Or died. I don't—I don't know. But she was gone after I was born."

Had she died in childbirth, then, somehow? An alien woman giving birth with no doctors to treat her. His father had always told him no, but his father had never told him he was Galra, either.

"Orilla never stayed in one place for very long," Kolivan said. His face was blank, but his eyes were sad. "I am not the only one of your House that remains. Many were left when my siblings and I joined the Blades, but our parents have passed on. Your uncle, your mother and mine's younger brother, lives on. His name is Thace. He is the one stationed at Zarkon's central command. And the one who let you and Voltron escape the witch's clutches when you attacked them last."

"Why are you telling me this?" Keith tore out. "It can't be because you care about me. I know you don't."

"I care for my sister," Kolivan said coolly, "despite everything. I care for her memory. She would be glad her son is fighting against the Galra. And, if you wish, you can be given the mark of our House and accepted into it."

"I don't want anything to do with your dumb House!" Keith snarled, bunching his hands into fists. Rage unlike anything he'd felt before was swelling in his chest. This wasn't the answer he'd wanted. He hadn't wanted family who was dead or soon to be, or ones that didn't give a damn about him. And besides, he had family back on Earth, his obasaan and Aunt Gina and Shiro—

Shiro.

And maybe, the team too. And Red. They came back for him.

And now it was time to get answers from the person who hadn't. Keith grit his teeth and walked away. It was only because his hands were shaking too much that he didn't chuck his Blade at Kolivan's feet, only because his father had died going back for it—

It felt like it weighed a thousand pounds, as he walked steadily out of the room, and Kolivan made no move to stop him.

:::

When there was a knock at Shiro's door that night, he didn't know who to expect. The princess, maybe? To tell him what she'd told Coran and hadn't wanted to reveal to the team the other week ago. Or maybe he just wanted to see her point blank, he thought, squashing the feeling. It was probably one of the paladins with a problem: homesickness, nightmares, something like that. He'd made his insomnia prone nights no secret in an effort to convince them it was okay to talk to him about anything, and so far only Pidge had taken him up on his offer, but—

He hadn't expected it to be Keith, looking absolutely pissed. "Keith, uh—?"

"Hey." The kid's arms were crossed over his chest, his mouth tight and his eyes angrily bright. "Can we talk?"

"Uh, yeah." Shiro stepped aside to let him in and the door closed. "What's this about, exactly?"

"Allura and I talked, on our way back from Alpha-Traz."
"Oh? I thought everything was good between you two, now that Coran's—"

Keith dropped his arms and glared up at him. "You seriously haven't told her about what you were like when she was captured?"

Shiro stumbled, taken aback. Since when had Keith started caring so much about his and Allura's relationship? "I didn't think—there's enough going on right now, Keith, and it's not the right time—"

"And if you haven't told her about that," Keith growled, "then what haven't you told me?"

Shiro's brow furrowed. "Keith, what are you talking about—"

"You were eight when my mother left—or died, or whatever—my mother, who's Galra, and you seriously expect me to believe you didn't know?"

Shiro raised his eyebrows, but kept his voice even, if a bit cool. "You were four months old by the time I first saw you. I never met your mother, and I've never lied to you."

Keith hung his head, his eyes glinting up under his bangs. "Yes, you have."

Shiro's temper rose a bit. "Keith—"

"You said you'd come back from Kerberos safe and sound," Keith said thickly, his voice torn between a snarl and something broken. "But you left me, just like everyone else. Except Allura, apparently. You'd rather get captured and tortured again then leave her, and you won't even tell her how you actually feel." Keith reached up and furiously swiped under his eyes with his thumb, wiping away glistening tears.

"Keith—" Shiro reached forward and pulled him into a hug, his arms tight, and while the boy stiffened, he eventually melted into it.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I just—I get angry when I get scared a-and—Kolivan's my uncle—"

Shiro pulled away slightly in surprise. "Kolivan?"

"He told me. After he asked you to have me hang back. Him and... him and Thace are my mom's brothers."

Shiro's eyes widened. "Thace?" Kolivan of the House of Maala... Tell Thace Maala I'm sorry. Guilt curdled in his chest, sudden and stiff and choking at the base of his throat. How could he have forgotten Ulaz's last words, his last request, for even a moment? The friend that Lira had been worried about: clearly Thace and Ulaz had been close. Lovers? But Shiro took a breath to centre himself, and looked down at Keith. "And? How're you feeling about that?"

"I don't know," Keith shrugged, still downcast. "I'm pretty sure it's the only reason Kolivan doesn't still hate me, and I've never met Thace, but his mission at central command is pretty dangerous—so maybe I never will, right?"

"No." Shiro placed his hands on Keith's shoulders. "You'll get the chance to know both of them, especially Thace, if I have anything to say about it. He's gonna live, because I have a message to deliver him. And once the teladuv plan goes off, the war will be over, and things will be okay. Okay?"

Keith wiped at his nose with his sleeve, his eyes still wet. "Okay." He moved forward to hug Shiro this time, but quickly let go. "Thanks, Shiro. I'm sorry I got so mad. I—I still think you should tell
Allura, though. You don't know how things might go. She could've gotten stuck on Alpha-Traz after all."

"I never did thank you for getting her back safely," Shiro said, giving the boy a small smile.

Keith gave another shrug. "It's what you would have done."

*It's what I tried to do,* Shiro realized, as Keith stepped towards the door, and his conversation with Allura once she'd gotten back from Alpha-Traz came rushing back.

*I should have a successor. Just in case.* And it was true. Hadn't the Blades done the same thing? Kolivan had said they'd had to scramble once Ulaz set him free. That going against the plan had thrown their own intel operation into jeopardy, and now another Galra named Thace was there and picking up the pieces.

But Allura had heard none of it. *Nothing is happening to you,* she'd promised. *I won't let it.* And he wanted to trust her. He always trusted her. But she could secure his survival as much as he could secure hers, and they both played a loose and fast game with their lives. They were the ones who had to lead the team, had to take the fall, had to ensure that the fight for peace in the galaxy would go on. That they'd end the war or die trying. The other Paladins hadn't understood at first, what they were taking on, and being asked to do as Paladins of Voltron. That their fight against the Galra held the same lifelong intensity as the Empire's mantra: Victory, or death.

It had been how Shiro had survived in the arena, after all. But the war wasn't a game, anymore, even if it always had to have a winner.

And this time, he couldn't shake the feeling that it wouldn't be him.

"Keith?" he said.

The boy turned back to him. "Yes?"

"If something happens to me, I want you to lead Voltron."

:::

Briz's egg hatched three days later, and Shiro tried to be happy. Tried not to act like Keith hadn't gotten angry at his suggestion, hadn't stalked out, and had stubbornly not talked to him the entire day afterwards. The team had written it off as Keith being moody, even if Pidge and Lance had asked him what was wrong, but Shiro knew Allura worried.

But Keith didn't understand, as Briz cooed over their baby space whale, hardly bigger than a large dog and flopping around in its tank. A war needed seconds. Allura needed someone she could depend on if he wasn't here anymore. He had to take care of her. He couldn't put more on her shoulders. And Keith could do it, with the self discipline, with his Galra bloodline that could match Zarkon's.

Shiro's shoulders tightened. Maybe it wouldn't have to come to that. Maybe they'd defeat Zarkon and everything would be okay. The Black Lion would protect him, and so was his team. He'd already beaten the odds once. Why couldn't he do it again?

But who was to say his borrowed time wasn't close to running out?

:::
They went to Shay's Balmera another two day later.

Shay was waiting with her people when the Castleship docked, and she and Hunk met somewhere in the middle. The Yellow Paladin picked her up in a hug and swung her around a few times before they settled.

"It is good to see you again, Shiro," Shay gushed, grinning, and he started, glad that a genuine smile spread on his face. When ceaseless thoughts had occupied his mind in the arena, there had been no happiness to distract from it.

"It's good to see you too, Shay," he said, and her eyes crinkled as Hunk greeted her grandmother and brother. "It's nice to see your planet's made a full come back."

"Yes," Shay said. "Thanks to Princess Allura. We owe her much."

Shiro's smile softened, as he watched the princess hug Shay's grandmother after Hunk. "I know the feeling."

Allura had given him a purpose, a Lion. His smile faltered. But he was no crystal or Balmera. He couldn't be healed by her magic touch, and sooner or later, he had to start facing that truth, no matter how ugly it was.

He had to, or someone else would pay the price.

:::

"Shiro?"

He turned with a hum to see Allura walking to his side, her voice soft and curious, two warm cups of coffee in her hands, and he smiled in the morning sun. It was always so easy to forget about whatever was troubling him, whenever he saw her. They'd taken to standing on the balcony of the base to watch the sun slowly rise over the rest of Olkarion, when the world was soft and yellow and asleep, only for them to observe. It'd become one of his favourite things about the planet over the last three months.

"Thank you," he said quickly, giving her a soft smile before taking a sip of his drink.

"You looked awfully deep in thought," she remarked. "Do you wish to speak of it?"

"Just needed my coffee," he said, trying for a joking tone. "You know how I get grumpy without it."

Her lips twisted into a smile, her eyes gleaming with amusement. "Not that grumpy," she mumbled, nudging her hip with his, before she looked out to the horizon and cradled her cup in her hands. "It is hard to believe three months have already gone by."

"Time flies when you're having fun," Shiro said. Allura had heard it often enough—sarcastically, mind you, when Lance was feeling too lazy to do drills—to not question the now familiar Earthling phrase.

"I've been thinking," Allura said, "now that there is not as much to do except for a mission here and there, we should take the whole team out for a trip of some kind. A picnic. One last day to do something fun with it."

Shiro smiled. "I'll run it by Kolivan. If he says no, maybe Antok can convince him otherwise." The Blade often had in their negotiations over the last few months.
Allura glanced down at the landscape stretching out before them, of tall, square buildings with rounded corners over rolling hills. "He and Antok are interesting, aren't they?" she said quietly. "Their relationship?"

"You think there is one?"

"It's easy to see. Love in wartime is always fragile," she said, looking over at him. "And strong."

His throat tightened. "How do you know that, princess?"

Somehow, her expression fell. "There are Altean stories of it. We have our old gods, and their lovers. One of our twin moons, Luna, fell in love with an Altean, but she could not make him immortal. Their war was against time itself." She pursed her lips. "It is easy to see who won."

"Not every love story is a tragedy," he reminded her gently.

"It feels like it."

"Hunk and Shay's isn't," he said. They'd been nearly inseparable since Shay had come back with them to work on the last minute finishes to the teladuv. Shiro's fingers skimmed her palm, and reached for the tips of hers, hesitantly. "And maybe not…"

He cleared his throat and stopped before his movement could be noticed. "We'll go, by the end of the week. It can be a short trip."

If Allura was disappointed, she didn't show it. "I'm sure the Blades won't put up much of a fight. Antok is a bit softer than his partner."

"That's not saying much," Shiro said with a wry smile, and Allura returned it.

"Hush, you. The Balmera can be a bit like a vacation. We cannot deny ourselves such a thing for one day, now can we?"

"No," he agreed, resting his eyes on her. After these two months on Olkarion, after all the sunrises he'd seen in the galaxy, he knew she was more beautiful than every one. "We can't."

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As it turned out, they could.

"Thace has stopped responding," Kolivan said, marching into the bridge room the next day with Antok and Lira on his heels. The paladins rubbed their sleepy eyes as they'd gotten closer to when Operation Teladuv was supposed to be enacted, sleep had been harder and harder to come by. "As far as the last 24 hours, and he has missed the check in point. If Zarkon's shields cannot be brought down by a man on the inside, then our operation is pointless."

"The teladuv is ready," Allura said sharply, "and our plan is already in motion. It is too late to turn back now."

"The princess is right," said Lira. "We should go as follows."

"You just want to stage a rescue mission," Kolivan told her shortly.

"You'd leave him to die?" Keith demanded.

Kolivan bristled. "You wouldn't?"
"This is pointless bickering," said Coran. "And hesitation is never wise. Do you want to defeat the Galra Empire, or not?"

"Yes," Kolivan said stiffly. "But the Blade of Marmora does not take chances. It's how we've survived for so long. The name of my House means patient in our tongue. I do not intend to jeopardize everything because we did not wait long enough, and it is too late to get someone else on the inside."

Lira raised her chin. "I'll do it."

Antok's voice crackled from underneath his mask. "Lira—"

"Vrepišt sa," she said fiercely, and Kolivan frowned unhappily. Whatever it meant in Galra must've meant something to the cold commander.

"Very well."

"Then things go forward as planned," Allura said. "Shiro uses the Black Lion to lure Zarkon to our fixed location, Pidge and Briz's cloaking device for the teladuv holds until everything is in place, the teladuv is powered up, and we take down Zarkon's central command in one fell swoop."

Briz cradled their space whale in their arms; the creature had a ribbon with Spawella in cursive stitched onto it. "And then Spawella and I go back to the seas," the scientist chirped. Allura held back a groan.

She loved Briz, of course, but sometimes…

"We leave as planned," said Kolivan, even if he didn't look any happier about it. "Meeting adjourned."

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Ten hours of sleep had been set aside before Operation Teladuv would begin, and Shiro wished he could use it. His feet steered him towards the training deck as though on autopilot, although his brain registered that something was different when he heard a thud come from the training room.

Allura was inside, whacking a bot down with a staff, beads of sweat on her brow and her bun slightly undone. She was already in her battle suit, and took the bot's head clean off its shoulders, the simulation ending before she turned over to look at him. "Shiro."

"You had the same idea, huh?" he said, striding forwards.

A small smile flitted across her face. "Yes, but I'm afraid the bots aren't much challenge."

"It looks like I know how you feel in more ways than one, then." Shiro picked at his tank top, and gave her a grin. Why was it, when the world could end tomorrow, being with her tonight was enough to ease his worries? Even in a juvenile, gym setting. "Wanna spar with me?"

She cocked a brow at him. "Is that a challenge?"

"I certainly hope I'll be, princess," he said, and dropped into a defensive stance opposite her. "Just don't go easy on me."

Allura smiled. "Oh, I won't."

He met her first blow and braced for her strength, and his knees only buckled slightly. Slowly but
surely, they fell into a rhythm, their fight becoming more of a dance. Parry here, step back there, weave under the arm and kick out the legs, and wait for the other to counter and secure in the certainty that they would. Like they'd been fighting together for centuries.

And for him, each blow meant something more. He met her strike with his forearm, and wanted to say, *I love you.* He dodged her blow and threw one of his own. *I want to tell you about Keith, and what I've asked him to do.* He ducked. *I want to tell you about everything.*

*I want to give you everything.*

But instead he focused on the way the air was pleasantly tight in his lungs, as Shiro panted for a second too long, and found himself heaved over and onto the floor with a well placed throw. He tilted his head back and puffed out a laugh, Allura looking far too pleased with herself, and offered him a hand to help him up.

"Truce?"

"I'm fairly sure you won, princess," he said, but accepted her hand and she pulled him to his feet. Neither of them let go.

"It doesn't feel fair," she said with a cheeky grin, although it gave way to a hint of concern. "You were clearly distracted."

His lips twitched upwards. "Yes, well, you're very distracting, princess."

Pink tinged her cheeks, and he nearly leaned in, emboldened by a certain kind of reckless daring, when her whole body seemed to shut down and she turned away. "It's time I told you how the teladuv will be powered," she said quietly.

His hand let go of hers. "I thought the Balmerans could help? It's their crystals, after all." That was what she had implied, and she had never told him otherwise. Why wouldn't she have told him otherwise?

But Allura shook her head. "It works the same way the Castle does. Only an Altean can harness its quintessence. We used to have teams of ten Alteans power a single teladuv. I will have to do it alone. I—" Her voice broke. "I may not survive."

Shiro took her hand, as though he could ground her here with that alone, alarm rising hot and fast in his throat. "Is there anything we can do?"

She shook her head again. "Coran does not have the ability. It has to be me." She saw the protest in his eyes, and rested her forehead against his, their eyes meeting. "It has to be me," she repeated softly.

"It's not fair," he murmured, reaching to take her other hand with his Galra one. "There must be something—" He froze. His prosthetic. *You could have been our greatest weapon.* "Allura. You said that all alchemists are sorcerers, but not all sorcerers are alchemists, correct?"

She drew away slightly. "Yes?"

"My arm. The druids made it. Couldn't it hold alchemic properties? Couldn't it be drained of them, like a battery?"

Allura frowned softly. "We'd would have to remove your arm. You would likely have to go into battle without it—"
He managed a smile. "I don't need two arms to fight the Galra."

"It would hurt," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "The removal of it, at the very least."

"If it means giving you a fighting chance to live, then I don't care," he said, resting his forehead against hers.

She smiled, her eyes bright. "Thank you."

"You," he said, squeezing her hand, "never have to thank me for anything."
Blackout

Chapter Summary

Team Voltron takes the fight to Zarkon. Sacrifices are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARC IV: Blackout

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Blackout

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They took his arm off in the early morning.

It turned out the rest of the team hadn't been able to sleep well either, and Coran found Hunk, Lance, Keith, and Pidge curled up together in the lounge on one of the sofas. Coran smiled softly at the miserable looks on their faces, and the way Pidge was practically sitting in Hunk's lap, showing the boys something that looked like an alien video game on their holopad in hopes for whatever distraction they could all have before the oncoming battle. If only they knew he'd have a much better one for them soon enough. Allura and Shiro had quickly relayed their new stage of the plan, and after Coran's quick embrace of the man—really, the fact that the princess thought Shiro might not feel the same towards her was baffling to Coran—he'd set off to collect the team.

It would be an all hands on deck sort of operation, so to speak (and no pun intended).

Dawn hadn't begun to break over Olkarion when Coran gathered them all in the medbay, and found Shiro and Allura huddled close together with their hands clasped, and speaking quietly. Allura ran her thumb once over his metal knuckles before she let go, and turned to face the team.

"Coran's told you what to do?" she checked.

Keith nodded. "We all want to help in whatever way we can."

Shiro's eyes glittered; with pride, maybe? "Good." He sighed, but managed a smile. Coran no longer wondered how he'd survived the arenas for so long, and his body bore the marks everywhere, now that he was wearing a tank top; his shoulders and left arm were riddled in scars, and Coran figured his right had been in the same shape before its removal. "Let's get started."

The surgery was long, but the paladins held steadfast. Hunk held Shiro down by the shoulders, Lance and Keith handing Coran whatever tools he needed while Pidge marked where the incisions should be. Allura held Shiro's other hand tight in hers, smoothing his hair back from his brow while he gritted his teeth, and tried to hold still as Coran sawed his Galra arm off. Untangling the wires from the blood vessels and skin of his shoulder, where the metal met flesh, was proving the most difficult, and Shiro held back a pained whine. His grip would've crushed Allura's fingers if she hadn't been so strong, and her heart twisted in the knowledge that he was only doing this for her.

That he thought her life was worth it.
If you care for him, tell him.

And hadn't he already told her, in more ways than one?

There was a final sickening pop, and then Shiro's arm lay on the side table, detached and spilling wires with bits of blood. His stump now revealed had pinpricks of blood from where the metal had been attached, but mostly it was scarred and shrivelled from the lack of space and air over the past two years, and his grip finally slackened on her hand. Shiro gave her fingers one last squeeze before he pushed himself up, a dizzying look in his eyes only there for a few moments.

"Alright," he coughed out. "Now that that's, settled, team, get some sleep, or get ready for the battle. I'll come check on you later."

"You sure you don't want us to stay with you?" Pidge offered, the team all looking at him with wide, concerned eyes. "We don't mind."

But Allura could tell he hated that the paladins had already seen him like this, weak and in pain, even if he was wrong to think that way. He wasn't weak, and what he had just done was one of the strongest things she'd ever seen anyone do. "I'll take care of him," Allura said, laying her hand on the table he sat on. Shiro looked at her, his lips pressed firmly together, but he didn't challenge her. Small mercies, she supposed.

Coran hefted Shiro's arm into his own. "I'll clean it up and make sure it's ready for the teladuv."

Allura placed a hand on Shiro's shoulder. "Thank you, Coran," she said, her eyes glistening. She walked over to the med cabinets as the paladins filed after Coran out of the room, and took down the right gauze, bandages, and cloths dipped in disinfectant before coming back to stand next to Shiro. "This'll hurt a little," she warned, dabbing gingerly at the spot of red along his stump with the cloth.

Shiro managed not to turn his smile into a grimace. "I'll manage," he promised. He gripped the side of the table he was sitting on tightly as she disinfected his wound, feeling his eyes on her.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, glancing up at him. "I should have told you how I planned to power the teladuv sooner. We could have done this earlier and given you have time to recover, and we could have built you a new arm—"

Shiro's fingers curled under her chin, and lifted her head up further. "You have nothing to apologize for," he said, gentle but firm, and her eyes widened. His fingers fell away. "But you telling me about things that are bothering you, or putting you at risk? That'd be nice."

She chuckled lightly, and most of her guilt ebbed away. "I'll make sure to do so in the future." Her smile fell. "Not that there's much future left." How much longer would their paths be intertwined, with things coming so close to the end?

"It seems crazy," he said, as though he could read her thoughts, "that if we pull this thing off, the war will be over."

"Practically," she agreed, reaching for the roll of gauze. "There will still be more work to do, but soon, the universe won't need Voltron, or us, anymore."

"We'll get to go home," he said, letting out a chuckle. They both knew how happy that would make the other paladins, Hunk and Lance in particular. Pidge would still look for their family, and Keith would too, but things would be different. Peaceful.

Allura paused in her wrapping. "You plan to go back to Earth then?" she asked carefully. Of course
he'd want to, she chided herself. He'd been in this with her since day one, but that didn't mean they had the same futures in mind. She didn't have a planet or a people, but she'd throw herself into politics, help freed worlds get back on their feet. And once his work as a paladin was done, Shiro was under no obligation to stay with her.

She'd thought he was like her—and he was, in a way—devoted and compassionate, set apart from the others in leadership and age and duty. But he still had a home to go back to, and a family, and people who loved him. He was still an Earthling as much as the paladins were.

"I'd like to see my family again," he said. "Let them know I'm okay, tie up some loose ends but... why, what are you planning to do?"

"Coran and I will try to establish a new galactic alliance," she supposed, speaking her thoughts aloud as they came. She focused on keeping her eyes trained on his injury, instead of thinking how close he was, and the way he was looking at her with his soft, grey eyes. "Work with the Blades and the rest of our allies. Getting the galaxy back on track will be no easy task, but that'll be politics and paperwork most of the time, not Voltron—"

"Would you like some help?"

Allura looked up. "What? N-no, I couldn't ask you to do that. You deserve to go home and—"

"Last time I was on Earth they strapped me to a table," he said with a nonchalant shrug, and then winced, forgetting about his newly sensitive shoulder. "I want to see my family, but... I always wanted to see the galaxy. Why not do it while helping people? Besides..." He glanced at his stump. "There are more people who need to be freed, prisoners and occupied planets. People like you, and people like me. I don't think I could relax on Earth knowing I could be helping people, but wasn't."

His soft gaze met her shocked one, but there was something new in his eyes. Like he was seeing her in a new way, somehow. Like something had suddenly clicked into place. "You gave me a purpose, Allura. I'm not letting go of it. Whenever you want my help, or even when you don't, you'll always have it."

Hope unfurled in her heart like a flower in bloom. "You mean it," she said, her voice breaking a little, and because it was Shiro it was a statement, instead of a question, even if she couldn't stop herself from asking one anyway. "You'd really be happy, like that? With me? A-and Coran," she added hastily.

His nose bumped lightly into hers, and there was something bold and bright in his eyes. Unburdened.

"I already am."

Allura kissed him.

His lips were soft and warm, and quickly parting under hers, the hand he still had coming up to rest on her back and draw her closer, and she let her hands rest on his chest. She could feel his heart, pounding and strong. Her marks glowed slightly, a soft pale pink, as she drew away, and found Shiro smiling at her in wonder. He leaned forward again, and lightly pressed his lips to the marks adorning each of her cheeks.

Any nerves in her chest vanished, and Allura broke into a smile, chuckling and leaning her forehead against his. "We're such fools," she said, smiling a tad tearfully, but it was also harder to remember ever being happier, since she'd stumbled out of the cryopod, "aren't we?"

Shiro's grin turned lopsided, and her heart fluttered. She wanted to see that sort of smile directed
towards her a thousand times over, a thousand times more. "I guess we are," he agreed, and rested his hand over the one she had on his chest.

"We'll talk more," she said, "after the war's over."

He arched an eyebrow. "Does this counts as talking?"

She laughed, and pressed her lips to his, meaning for it to be brief, but unable to pull herself away from him so quickly again after so long. Finally, though, she managed. "I would say so," she said. "But regardless, you should be resting. You've been through quite an ordeal, and we have a mission in seven vargas."

"I know," he said, and a yawn leaked out of his mouth. "I just don't want this to turn out to be a dream."

Her eyes crinkled, and her other hand touched his jaw. "I'll get you situated in a cryopod," she said softly, "for some last minute healing. I'll take you out a couple vargas before the Operation's set to begin. Alright?"

"Okay." He kissed her, and then let her walk him back to the bridge, her hand warm in his. He never wanted to let go. Still, he did, after one last squeeze of her fingers in his.

"I'll see you on the other side, Takashi," she promised.

A soft smile pulled at his lips, even as he stepped back and felt the familiar freeze at the tips of his toes. "See you on the other side, princess."

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Lira was set to leave a varga before everyone else, and Keith was glad he'd caught her in time. Lance had been the one to direct him to the Blue Lion's hangar, as he'd given it to her as a prep space for her mission beforehand, and Keith walked in to find Lira bent over a table, strapping something onto the side of her mask, with black bandages lying on the small work table next to it. The Blue Lion loomed over her, almost protectively, and Keith wondered if it was Blue or also through the bond Lance had formed with the Galra girl (or both).

She turned when she heard him enter. "Keith," she said, her eyes guarded. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I just wanted to talk to you," Keith shrugged, "before you uh, well... you're going to see my uncle, Thace."

Her brow knit together, and then she started winding the black bandages between her fingers. "We share an uncle. Strange."

"Oh, yeah—Thace and your uncle were close, weren't they?"

"They were arlans."

"Arlan?"

"It means beloved, and chosen one. The one with a star soul that is the twin of yours. Your life partner. It's not always your lover, but usually. And now my blood uncle is dead and my remaining one will see the same fate unless I complete my mission properly."
"You will," Keith said. "You're a good fighter."

"Hm. Maybe so." Still, her face lifted, and Keith took a step closer.

"I am surprised Kolivan agreed to this mission, though," Keith said. "Whatever you said to him—vrepit sa?—it must've really meant something to him. I didn't realize the Blades used it too; I've only ever heard people of the Empire use it."

"Vrepit sa," Lira said, with a humourless smile and a slight shake of her head. "It means unto death. It means one's penultimate duty, either until completion or until death. It is an ancient Galran concept, born during the war with the Alteans more than a hundred thousand years ago. It's a part of our marriage vows, too. But the Empire's corrupted it..." Her eyes narrowed. "Just like they have with everything else." She sighed. "If you're here because you want me to speak to Thace, however briefly, on your behalf, you need not be. He is not as hardened as Commander Kolivan. He will welcome you into the House of Maala as readily as he would have welcomed me, should I have chosen it."

"You didn't want a new House?" Keith asked. The idea of having a House, another sect of belonging, a family, being offered, and then turned down... It was unimaginable. Why would anyone choose to be alone?

"I still bear my House's marks." She broke off and tied the last of the bandages into a knot at the base of each of her wrists, and as she lifted her hand Keith saw her hands and fingers were streaked in black residue. She drew a triangle over each of her eyebrows, and then over her chin. "The triangle over the chin is a sign of mourning. I shall wear it until I breathe my last."

"I didn't mean that—"

"I know what you meant. You just have much to learn." Lira gave him a small smile. "I know my uncle will be proud to have a nephew like you. He will be excited to meet you, once I tell him of your existence. You never struck me as a fearful one, Red Paladin. Don't start being one now." A buzzer went off at her wrist, and Lira tucked her mask under her arm. "Go join your team. The fight is near."

They walked out of the Blue Lion's hangar together. Her pod for infiltration was waiting in the Castle's general hangar, her walking one way and him the other.

"Keith?" she said, once he turned to go.

He looked back at her. "Yeah?"

"I know both of us are rather alone in this galaxy. Thace is connected to both of us. What I'm trying to say... if you and I were to be cousins to each other, I would not be opposed."

Keith smiled. "I'd like that. Good luck, Lira."

She fitted her three eyed mask over her face. It shimmered and then slotted into place, the places where she'd put the black triangles glowing momentarily white through her mask until they were cloaked underneath too. Her voice garbled when she spoke again. "You too. Ask Kolivan for the mark of your House, if you wish."

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The paladins gathered on the bridge, one last time. They'd pulled on their armour, Shiro's sealing over his stump. One of the benefits of having something built so attuned to its pilot's mirrored
quintessence was the way it would shift and mould itself to perfectly fit its paladin. Allura had little
doubt that if Shiro concentrated hard enough he could will the uniform to make an arm for him that
would work so long as he wore the suit.

"Lira is already in position," Allura said, after clearing her throat, and the quiet murmurings of her
team fell silent. She hated to interrupt them, but the time they had come. They couldn't put it off any
longer. And—she chanced a smile at Shiro, before quickly looking away—perhaps they no longer
needed to. "We will be taking off with the Blades in a matter of doboshes. Is everyone ready?"

"Ready as we'll ever be," said Lance, puffing out his chest. His visor glinted over his steady eyes.

"Yeah," said Pidge, their bayard already in hand. "Let's make this count and land a heavy blow
against the Galra Empire." They glanced at their friends. "For all of our families."

Allura looked at the family she and Shiro had built together—three runaways, a dropout, a prisoner,
and the last of a dying race—and her chest swelled with pride. "Every second since we met have led
to this day," she said. "I know you will protect each other, and make me proud. Now," she smiled
faintly, "get to your Lions."

"C'mon," said Shiro, and she saw the paladins brace themselves for a rousing speech of some kind,
when he grinned and simply said, "I know we can do this. Now let's go kick Zarkon's quiznak!"

Lance whooped and Hunk clapped Shiro on the back, and even Keith smiled.

"Now seriously," said Allura, her smile fading and conscious of every tick. "Let's go."

"Yes ma'am," said Hunk quickly, and he and the other paladins went to their respective ziplines.
Only Shiro hung back.

Coran looked between them, and cleared his throat. "I'll go do a last minute check in with the Blade
—see if Lira's already touched down—" Coran speeded out of the room.

Allura couldn't truly be annoyed as she turned to Shiro. "Very inspiring speech," she said dryly.

Shiro smiled and took her hand and twined their fingers together. "I dunno," he said softly. "I think it
did the trick." He leaned in and kissed her, and Allura allowed herself a smile before he stepped
away, and only let go of her hand when he absolutely had to. "See you on the other side, princess."

Her smile softened, as she watched his pedestal take him down. "See you on the other side, Shiro."

:::

She was going to die here.

Not that Lira had ever thought she'd live particularly long, but still. She'd found her uncle pre-
barricaded in central command's mainframe, hadn't even had time to hug him before he'd been
pulling her behind the dashboard as cover fire from the guards pouring in at the exit. There were red
welts on his purple brow, one of his furry ears ruffled, a result of being caught as a spy before he'd
managed to make his way to the mainframe, before they'd both holed themselves up here on the
narrow bridge. Otherwise he was unharmed, but she knew it wouldn't last long. They hadn't had
time to lower the shields—and the Operation would fall apart without it, she knew.

Shiro would've lured Zarkon in with the Black Lion by now. The other Paladins would've gone to
join them, while the Blades and Olkari and Brizo got the teladuv into shape. Allura would be
powering it now, with Shiro's old Galra arm. They were all risking so much, and it would all be for
nothing unless they got these shields down.

"You bring down the shields," she whispered to her uncle. "I'll cover you."

"Lira—" Thace said, and she knew he was going to protest. It was close to a suicide mission for both of them—but that was what she had expected when she'd signed on for this mission, and she knew it'd been the same for him as well.

Lira gripped his hand. "For Ulaz," she said, a faint smile on her lips, and Thace squeezed her hand and nodded. He'd trained her well enough by now to know exactly what she was thinking. She took out her blaster with one hand and leapt over the dash board with the other, and he landed squarely beside her, throwing up a holoscreen as a temporary shield while she fired a warning shot and then turned towards the mainframe data-board. Her hands were shaking as she typed as quickly as she could, her Blade warm at her hip, as listened to her uncle she still gun down sentries, one by one.

"Come on," she whispered furiously under her breath, "come on—" She didn't want to die here, and she didn't want Thace to, and they wouldn't if she had anything to say about it.

Their holoscreen shield shattered, and Thace pressed himself closer to her back, and gripped his gun tighter. Lira heard him inhale sharply, and the smell of burning flesh and corrupted metal, but she didn't look away. The first two walls of encryption were down. Now for the third. "You okay?" she asked.

"Fine," Thace grunted.

Lira drew her bottom lip between her teeth and kept going, jumping when a laser hit the screen above her and sent down a shower of sparks. "There!"

The third wall of encryption came down, and so did the shields. Pidge's grinning gremlin icon drifted over the screen, when Lira plugged in one of the chips the paladins had gifted her and unleashed the programmed virus onto the command system.

"Good," Thace wheezed, and he fired off his blaster in more rapid succession. "Now get out of here —there's a vent system that will take you down to the ship's hangar a decent drop below. You can steal a ship—"

"No," Lira said. "You're coming with me—"

"Lira—"

"There's someone you need to meet," she said, twisting around and drawing her own blaster. She hit one guard and missed another. "Besides, we're working with Voltron now, and they don't leave people behind, so come along. We'll jump together on the count of three."

And Thace looked in her eyes, and saw the same expression he imagined Ulaz had worn before he died, and knew there was no arguing with her. "Fine."

They inched their way towards the edge of the database's circular platform, and Lira glanced down at the drop. She could see the ventilation system Thace was talking about, a good twenty feet below, with more further down at regular intervals. They'd have to angle themselves right, but they could make it.

Lira fired at one last guard. "Ready?" she said, grabbing her uncle's arm with her spare hand. She had to make sure he didn't back out of this.
Thace swallowed. "Ready."

"One—two—"

"Three!"

They jumped.

:::

The teladuv shimmered into existence, the cloaking device unable to hold any longer, and without verification that central command's shields were down. Shiro swore under his breath, his hand tightened over the control of his Lion, glad that Black had responded easily and swiftly to his lack of a left arm. "Alright team, we're going to need to buy more time than we thought—protect the Teladuv and the Castle from the Galra fighters at any cost!" If it took too many hits, it wouldn't function, and nothing would be able to get them out of central command this time.

Pidge flew by, swinging Green into gear with a well placed tail fire, and they blew a Galra ship to splinters, and Keith and Lance each shot down two fighters apiece off to Shiro's right.

"Is there any way of checking on Lira?" Lance asked.

"Or Thace?" Keith said.

"If they've implemented Pidge's virus to bring down the shields, it'll jam Zarkon's communications systems as well so he can't call for backup," Shiro reminded them. "And we don't want to give away their signals in central command if they haven't yet. We just have to have faith and trust that they can do this—"

He saw Keith's Lion swerve towards a new Galra shuttle being emitted from central command, and the Red Lion's tail begin to power up. "Keith wait!" came Allura's voice from the Castle, and the flare died up as soon as it had started. "That's Lira and Thace, they're hailing the Castle—the shields are down—"

"Then we'll get out of your way, princess," Shiro said, and then barked to his team, "Clear the area of the teladuv. We don't want to be caught in its rays once it's powered up."

They'd remove Zarkon's central command from the allies it did have here, and then take the station on in another nearby and Galra deserted galaxy that Regris was looking for the Blades with some of the Balmerans and Hootowlings in Olkari ships to make sure it stayed that way until the time was right.

"I'm charging the teladuv now," Allura announced, and Shiro could hear the hum of the castle in her commfeed. He switched his over to a single channel.

"Allura?" he said. "Be careful."

He could hear the sweet smile in her voice. "Your sacrifice will make all the difference," she assured him. He was just glad Coran knew how to use his arm as a power source. "Now, take care of our team."

The teladuv glowed a pale Altean blue, and then gold, as space swirled around it and slowly drew the entirety of Zarkon's central command into its berth. Thace and Lira's pod docked in the Castle's hangar in what looked like a rough landing, but Shiro was too far away with the Black Lion to make sure, keeping the Paladins encased between him and the Castle. He'd send them in first before
following, and before they would all be dropped into a galaxy with their allies waiting.

Only a few minutes to know whether Allura would still be with them, too.

The galaxy bent beneath them as the Lions flocked together and followed into the teladuv's arching wormhole, before they all came tumbling out into an empty shred of space. Zarkon’s central command groaned as it skidded and hit a nearby bomb the Blades had planted, bringing it to a halt with fire spreading over the hull of the escape pod hangar. It was time.

Shiro swerved the Black Lion into position. "Alright team," he said. "We've gotta act fast. The power will only be down for twenty minutes. The schematics Thace transmitted to the Blades showed four targets we need to hit: the weapons systems, the engines, the bridge, and the shield generators. You all know which target you're aiming for while I lay down cover fire. Now, let's go and put an end to Zarkon, once and for all."

He watched as the boys and Pidge flew off, and the Black Lion shot down a nearby fighter before it barely registered in Shiro's mind, now that he was typing rapidly to get his commlink re-established with the castle, after a momentary break in tech. "Coran?" He said, glad when his screen got through, even if his expression remained hard. "How's Allura?" They weren't out of the woods yet after all, the most telling part of the battle to come, and the unconscious Allura in Coran's arms with the advisor kneeling on the ground didn't look well, and yet Shiro refused to think that she may have —

"She's weak," Coran said, "but okay. Your arm really did a number on the teladuv." Indeed, Shiro could see the hunk of metal lying discarded next to Allura's faintly glowing platform.

His lungs loosened, and the galaxy seemed bright again. "Good." Relief leaked into Shiro's voice. For the first time since entering the battle, it felt like he could breathe again, even if all he wanted to do once this was over was reunite with Allura and have her steal the air from his lungs in a good way, the way she always had. "Take care of her." He knew what her greatest concern would be, once she woke up, and added, "We got it from here." She had done more than enough. Hopefully this would help her see that, this time at least.

And as Shiro watched his team dodge and blast more Galra fighters out of the sky, and hit their targets, he thought they might actually pull this off. Things were going according to plan, mostly. Or at least he thought so, until something bulky and purple started zooming towards the Lions, and he realized with a start that it was Zarkon.

Shiro felt him before he saw the dark glint in the emperor's eyes though, a headache splitting his head open, and he felt Black rattle beneath him, distress clouding their connection. They might have been free of him, but it didn't mean he wasn't terrifying—or dangerous.

Shiro patted his dashboard with his hand. "Easy girl," he said. "We've still got this." He switched onto his team's commlink. "Which targets are left?"

"The bridge," Pidge said, weariness in their voice. "I don't know why, but none of my shots have gone through. There must be a shield there that's separate from the others, somehow. It looks almost... purple?"

"Magic," Allura's voice cut in with a hard edge, and Shiro's heart leapt. "It must be Haggarg and her druids. They can only withstand so much, however. A larger blow should do the trick."

"Voltron's sword," Keith said, bringing his Lion below Shiro's and crushing a Galra fighter in her jaw.
Shiro gazed at the black, star strewn battlefield, and the few Olkari ships that hadn't excavated, with the Castleship and disempowered teladuv glittering in the distance. At Zarkon's armoured form, which was growing larger and a more pressing problem with every passing second.

"Alright then team," said Shiro. "Form Voltron!"

The tug of the Lions and in his gut was familiar by now, almost comforting, even as more thoughts and emotions crowd his head than usual. Keith's hot, trigger happy anxiety and Lance's more subdued, cooler version of it, Pidge's calculations and Hunk's worry. Shiro smoothed them down, and felt the others fall into line with him. It wasn't enough as the leader of Voltron to exude confidence. You had to believe it too, believe in everything that was worth believing in: teamwork and victory and courage. He felt his team pull themselves together, legs and arms and into a fighting stance, ready to defend everything they held dear.

Shiro thought of Allura and Coran in the castle, and knew the wanting to defend part would be easy.

Handling Zarkon's new suit wasn't easy, though. The emperor didn't stumble when Voltron drew its sword and landed a blow that bounced almost harmlessly off his chest. They dodged Zarkon's new lasers and his fast working jet pack, and Shiro's throat tightened at the sight of the Black Bayard in his enemy's hand, felt Black's magnetic pull to it no matter how much she resisted. Paladin and bayard and Lion weren't meant to be separated like this, and he felt it permeate their bond, even if theirs didn't waver.

"We need to get behind him," Shiro shouted, "and strike the bridge with our sword. Taking down Zarkon is secondary to taking down his command."

"Yes sir," said Lance, and he and Hunk put their Lions' blasters into overdrive. They gained height on Zarkon, but not enough to clear him.

"We'll keep Zarkon distracted," Allura said, before Shiro opened his mouth to ask for ideas. "You focus on central command—"

Shiro exhaled sharply. Zarkon was smaller and faster, and the Castle's shields had already been weakened by directing power to the teladuv and from residue fire from the Galra fighters. But he couldn't deny that her plan made sense, even if he didn't like the idea of leaving the Castle vulnerable.

"Give us a few more doboshes with Zarkon," he requested. "I think I know how we can beat him. We need to get out of Voltron's formation—he won't be able to handle attacks from all of us individually and all at once." Allura stayed quiet, and Shiro tried again. "Princess?"

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Allura pursed her lips. She knew exactly how Shiro had come to this conclusion, and why, although she couldn't berate him for it. His plan wasn't bad either. Her brow furrowed underneath her circlet, as she resented, and kept her eyes on Voltron, suspended for just a second in its battle against Zarkon before it dove back in, waiting for her permission to try a new tactic; Shiro had always let her have the last word, after all.

"Very well," she relented. "I'm giving you until the tenth dobosh, maximum."

The Lions split apart in a blinding flash of light—but it wasn't because they had willed it. Arcs of black lightning had raked across the darkness from central command, and hit them in a fierce, rattling wave of dark quintessence, and Allura saw it coming before she could warn them.
"NO!" Her scream splintered in her soul, somewhere deep and aching. The Lions floated lifelessly, eyes dark, and as Coran's fingers scrambled over the keys, the commlink feeds came back, static and blank. She knew what Haggar's komar, her quintessence channeller, was capable of. It'd sent them spiralling across the galaxy the last time they'd been at Zarkon's central command. Why had she thought it would be so easy to overcome this time? She was such a fool.

Allura's eyes stung. If the komar could channel such destructive power, then what had it done to the paladins?

A light flickered in the corner of her eye, as Coran got the commlink back up, even if the video feed was still down. Static marred the audio, as Allura strained her ears to hear breathing, anything.

"Paladins?" Coran said desperately. "Paladins!"

"Paladins!" Allura said, and her voice cracked, raw, and close to crying. If they didn't respond—if he didn't respond—she didn't know what she would do. "Shiro! Can you hear me!"

And then hoarse, familiar breath broke over the link, and every star in the galaxy seemed to reappear. "Yes," Shiro croaked, "Princess. We're alive."

"Oh, thank the ancients!" Coran exclaimed, but Allura knew she could give into no such relief, as she spied Zarkon flying closer over the Black Lion. Her paladins were alive, but if she wanted to keep them that way, she had to snap back into action.

"Is Voltron operational?" she asked.

"It's not working," Hunk groaned, and she heard Keith jamming his controls, trying to get them to respond.

"I can't move my lion," he grunted.

"You've been hit with some kind of witchcraft that draws the quintessence out of you," Coran explained. "You need to get out of there! Another blast like that and you may not survive!"

"We're trying!" Lance puffed.

"You must get moving," Allura said. Zarkon was getting closer. More forked lightning was growing at the base of the komar, its purple glow staining the sky. She hated being this helpless, but there was nothing else she could do. "Remember your training," she tried. She had a feeling encouraging words wouldn't be enough this time, but it had to be. "Remember all the battles you've been through.

"Voltron's still not responding," Shiro reported, and a pained growl crackled over the commlink. "It's Zarkon," he said. The Emperor must have been trying to reclaim the Lion with whatever dark magic he could get his hands on.

But Allura's stomach plummeted when she saw Zarkon, instead of flying closer, moving further away from the Black Lion. As though to avoid something: the next shot of Haggar's magic from the komar.

"We must buy them more time," Allura said, placing her hands on her controls. "Get us in closer," she ordered Coran. "Divert all power to our weapons system."

"What?" her advisor spluttered. "Princess, we'll be defenseless!"

"It's the only way," she said, and funneled her quintessence into the ship. Got it moving. "Listen to
me. You are true paladins now. Connect with your lions, reach out to each other! Fight! This cannot
end now!" She saw the oncoming lightning, and counted her heartbeats in time. Were they
numbered? "Fire!"

She closed her eyes, knowing Coran wouldn't miss, knowing that Haggar wouldn't either. If worst
came to worst...

Shiro would understand. He was strong. Lance had been right: nothing could break him, and so this
wouldn't, either.

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Allura's scream tore through him, before static overtook the commlink and Shiro watched all the
Castle's lights go dark. Remnants of Haggar's attack flashed around the Castleship, and all Shiro
could do was scream her name. "ALLURA!"

No. His throat burned and his eyes stung as he tore his gaze away from the darkened castle, and to
the dashboard of his Lion. Black's silence didn't help matters either, and Shiro could only stare
blankly. Allura. No. His expression hardened and he closed his eyes, refusing to let tears slip down
his face. They still had a battle to win, and he could not—would not—have let her died in vain.

"Everybody," he choked out, his tone controlled but with rage shaking underneath. "Listen. We have
to fight. We have to channel all our energy. Visualize five becoming one. We have to focus
everything we have into moving Voltron. We are the last thing standing in the way of Zarkon's total
universal domination. I'm not giving up that fight!" Black nudged underneath him, a gentle but
steady thrum, and then charged with anger. She was angry about Allura (and Coran) as well. She
was coming back to him. "Are you, Hunk?" Shiro asked.

"No," Hunk said. He'd come too far to back down now, learned too much, about Shay and what the
Galra would do without them. Won too many hard earned allies, especially the Blades, to let things
die now, even if they would. But at least, Hunk thought vaguely, and felt Yellow roar and comfort
rush through their link, they would go down together.

"Pidge?"

They gripped their controls, and thought of their family. If they didn't make it out of this battle,
maybe Elyta could find them. *I'll find the truth*, they had said, a lifetime ago back on Earth. *I'll never
stop*. And they wouldn't stop now. There were some things in the galaxy more important than their
family.

"Never!" said Pidge, and the Green Lion came back to life.

"Lance?" Shiro said.

And hey, Lance figured, he'd always wanted to go down in a blaze of glory. A battle for the good of
the universe. It didn't get much more glorious than that. He gripped his controls even if his hands
were shaking. "Let's go down swinging," he said with a grin, his eyes still teary from Allura, but
Blue's eyes flashed amidst his. He had one girl back, now.

And Shiro knew he didn't have to ask, and did so anyway, "Keith?"

Red revved with a roar, gold eyes gleaming. Had the kid ever done anything with any less? "I'm all
in."

Shiro felt the thrum of all the Lions, and his team, their quintessence slowly combining as they came
back to life. "Then let's get Voltron back in this battle. Hunk?"

The Yellow Paladin's voice pitched upwards. "Huh?"

"Think this Bayard of yours is good to go?"

"What? Oh, yeah, I mean—" Hunk's panic softened. "I trust you, Shiro."

"Then let's form Voltron, and give Zarkon something to really worry about." They'd have to defend the Castle, as the robot came together again, and although Haggar's magical shield was down it wouldn't stay like that for very long, probably, and they still had to hit the bridge. Hopefully this would work.

Shiro took out the bayard Hunk had constructed him, sliding it into Black's slot and turned it, and that was when everything went wrong.

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"Princess!" Coran was shaking her shoulder. Why did she feel so weightless? "Allura, wake up!"

Her eyes slowly opened. The Castle was dimly lit by the backup generator, all the comms and holos down, and she and Coran were floating aimlessly over the bridge. Antok and Kolivan seemed to have fared only a bit better, and Kolivan was helping his partner up with a hand.

"How badly is the Castle damaged?" she managed. Coran had floated his way to the databoard and had gotten the lights back on, and was working on the gravity switch.

"It certainly is in rough shape," said Lira, the doors swooshing open. Her mask was off and her hair floated up as the lack of gravity hit her. A Galra man who must've been Thace slightly floated behind her. "We felt the hit all the way down from the hangar. What happened?"

"A hit from Haggar's komar," Kolivan grunted. "So long as it is operational, it is a threat—to us and to Voltron."

Allura looked out the dark windows of the Castleship to the said robot. The Black Lion tore apart from the others, who followed, flung across the Black Lion's eyes were flickering somehow, but the other Lions were operational and baiting Zarkon away from their leader. Her heart clenched.

"We're going to have to attack the witch directly if we hope to stop that thing," Allura said. She rolled back the left control core of the castle's steering controls, and took a staff out that had been hidden in the pole. "Get a commlink set up with the paladins and route it back to mine and find out what's happened to Shiro," she ordered. "And help Lira get a cryopod set up for Thace." He looked like he'd need it. "We'll go strike the final blow against central command. Kolivan, Antok, I would be honoured and grateful if you would accompany me."

Something in Kolivan's eyes were almost warm. Hope? Or perhaps even a bit of gratitude as well. "Of course, princess." Antok followed him wordlessly as they walked towards the door. They'd need to use her motorbikes to fly over to where the komar lay.

"No," Coran pleaded with her. "You've been weakened by operating the teladuv. You can't face Haggar directly!"

Allura looked over at the Black Lion, the only defense between Shiro and open space and whatever blow the Galra decided to hurl at them next. Even the Yellow Lion wouldn't be big enough to drag Black somewhere safe, and who Haggar had hurt more than anyone. Allura's face hardened. "We
don't have a choice. Coran," she looked back at her advisor, and hoped it wouldn't be for the last time, "the bridge is yours."

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The Paladins couldn't keep doing this forever. Pidge knew it, even as they dodged one of Zarkon's lasers only to be hit with a blast from the Black Bayard. Their Lion went spiralling, and Pidge's throat closed up when they saw Zarkon closing in on the still lifeless Black Lion. "Keep Zarkon away from the Black Lion!" they shouted, zooming forwards.

Keith fired off a blast that hit the Emperor in the back and drew Zarkon's ire. "Come on! We can't give up!"

"I'm running out of strength, man," Hunk panted.

"Look out!" Lance yelled, and a shock-wave from the Black Bayard rattled all their Lions.

Pidge had to fight to keep their teeth from chattering, but then felt a tug on their body, muscles pulled taut everywhere but in their left arm. They turned towards the Black Lion, which was floating near the Castleship.

Shiro was coming back to them.

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"You will never destroy another innocent world!"

Allura slammed her hands into the ground, and watched the komar crackle beneath her. Kolivan helped an injured Antok to his feet, as Haggar was sent sprawling against the metal walls of the hangar, two of the druids dead and one fleeing as fast as they could. The power was unlike anything Allura had felt, but not entirely unwelcome. In any case, it'd saved her life, Haggar's magic skating over her shoulders like rainwater, even if it'd made her bones burn in the process. Now the magic came back, glowing at her fingertips and nstable and hot, rushing through her veins as she channelled it outward. She didn't want to think of what could become of her if it made its way inward, instead, as the kombar crumbled and the purple walls of the hangar bent under her force.

She glanced back at Antok and Kolivan. They'd have to share a bike on the way back, and she hopped onto hers and waved them over. "Come! We must get out of here before the ship collapses!"

And now that she could see the Black Lion, and then a rejoined Voltron, moving across the battle, it made her heart leap with joy to her throat. Perhaps all would be well, after all.

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The Black Bayard was warm and weighted in his hand, as Shiro raised it and felt Black roar happily through their link. Reunited and right, at long last. Shiro looked at the slot rising above him. The bayard Hunk had built for him was lying on the floor below it, corrupted in dark magic that the rest of Voltron had been able to ward off, and Shiro pushed the Black Bayard—*his* Bayard—into place.

Voltron's sword blazed with fire as they shoved it into Zarkon's armoured chest, and the emperor fell. In his peripheral vision, Shiro saw two small dots—both Altean white and blue, one lone figure on the motorbike, and two on the other—streaking out of the collapsing central command and towards the Castle.

*Allura.*
Shiro's grit turned to happiness, before he turned his attention back to the battle at hand. His headache from Zarkon's presence hadn't lessened, but if his time in the arenas had taught him anything, it was how to fight through the pain. He urged Voltron on and Keith and Pidge drove the sword deeper into Zarkon's chest.

Zarkon raised his mecha's hands, and seized the head of Voltron between them. Thick black lightning and blaster fire grew between the two hands, and Shiro felt it begin to permeate the corners of his Lion.

"Keep going!" he ordered to the others. If they could just keep going—strike deep enough, skew Zarkon's heart—then Zarkon's suit would be powerless, and without a helpful recharge from his wife.

The Castle's windows glowed, and Allura's voice broke over the commlink. "Paladins—Shiro, what's going on?"

Zarkon gave a final yell, and all his power rushed towards the Black Lion. The first wave hit—electricity and energy and corrupted quintessence all at once—and Shiro yelled out in response, gritting his teeth. This was pain unlike anything he'd felt before, unlike Zarkon or Haggar's chokehold, worse than when his face was cut open along his scar, worse than being conscious when his arm had been ripped away in a Galra prison hold—but not worse than when he'd drifted away to safety in a shuttle pod, and had to leave Allura behind, the lights turning off one by one.

Almost as worse as realizing his worst fear was coming true, now. He wasn't strong enough to beat Zarkon, even with the Black Lion, and somehow it was even worse that he'd seen it coming and hadn't done enough to prepare anyway. Had given into false hope and soon to be wasted dreams, ones that would never come to fruition. He'd never see his family again.

Shiro knew now that there was no grand destiny for him in this universe—not in the universe, not with the team, and not by Allura's side. He was just an astronaut turned slave turned soldier, and it was his duty to die in service.

Shiro screamed and pushed back against Zarkon's rage, knowing it would hit them both in a crescendo—that he wouldn't survive. But if he took Zarkon out with him, and kept his team safe, it would have to be worth.

"Shiro?" Allura's voice was pitched and panicky. She was crying. "Shiro pull back—"

Shiro wanted to cry alongside her. He wanted to live. He wanted to stay with his Lion and his friends. Wanted more early morning coffees on Olkarion, wanted to see whatever wildly cool arm Hunk and Pidge would have built him for him after this, wanted to see Keith and Lance grow and simmer down. But now he would get to see none of it. They would all have to see it for him.

"Princess," he managed, his voice wracked with pain. He didn't want to break his promise to her. I'm not leaving you. But what choice did he have?

He drove the sword in deeper, felt Keith and Pidge's alarm, Lance's worries and Hunk's panic—felt Black's low, mournful rumble—and felt his world tilt on its axis, into painful darkness.

The paladins and his princess cried out over the commlink. "Shiro, no—"

"I'm sorry," he said.

He had one last shining thought of Allura—her smile after she'd kissed him—and then everything was gone.
Allura had lost everything, before. She'd lost worlds, her home and her friends and her family. Her planet. Her parents. She'd lost her godparents and her trust in them, she'd lost Merla to the druids and possibly to darkness. She'd lost having the Castle truly feel like home, that first night she'd awaken it to find its hallways covered in dust and haunted by ghosts of things only she and Coran could see, the new aliens in their midst strangers.

"D'you want any help?" Shiro had asked, when everyone else had gone to bed, and she and Coran stayed awake, rooting out wires and rebooting systems.

Allura had been the one to turn and answer him, getting a good look at him for the first time that day, now that their lives weren't horribly in danger. He was scarred, but kind eyes. Handsome, if there was time to notice that sort of thing, which there wasn't. She'd smiled at him, a trace of genuine warmth in her chest for the first time that day, since she'd stumbled out of the cryopod and realized how much she had lost.

"Thank you," she'd replied. "But Coran and I are right on schedule. You should get some rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day." Coran had already whispered to her about having a practice drill first thing in the morning, when the mice had helped them clean off the dust on the Castle's databoard.

Shiro had turned and left, and it was only later that she'd realized he likely wouldn't have been able to sleep either.

And now he might be sleeping forever, because she hadn't helped when it mattered most, in any way it mattered, and it was all her fault—

"Shiro? Shiro!"

Allura led the charge into the Yellow Lion's hangar, Hunk having been the one to haul the Black Lion inside once Allura had jumpstarted a wormhole. Zarkon's central command might have been destroyed, and the emperor himself dead, but that didn't mean it was safe to stay here—but Allura couldn't have cared less, as Hunk stumbled out of his Lion, slower to reach the hangar due to the added weight.

The Black Lion's eyes were glowing, but everything else was lifeless.

The Lion's mouth opened, and the paladins and Coran raced up the ramp to the cockpit on her heels. Keith bypassed her in the hallway, yelling his brother's name, until they came upon an empty cockpit, and Allura's heart burned like a funeral pyre. The Black Bayard glittered a faint purple, still fitted in its lost, and the Black Lion's chair was empty, save Shiro's helmet with a cracked visor laying on the seat.

Allura gripped the back of the chair, her fingers nearly tearing at the fabric, and fell to her knees. Tears dripped down her cheeks. "NO—" Coran's hands found her shaking shoulders, as tears skirted the edges of his mustache.

Hunk had pulled Pidge to him, the younger paladin crying into his chest, while angry tears burned in Keith's eyes and Lance's face remained blank, shocked beyond comprehension.

Keith paced, storming and striding along the backend of the cockpit. "No, he can't—he can't do this to me again—" His anger burned away to grief, and Hunk pulled him against him too, the Yellow Paladin crying silently.

"W-we have to find him," said Lance. "He can't just be gone—his helmet's still here, that—" Lance
looked afraid to touch it, as though it would make the last piece of him they had disappear too.

But Allura had lost too many people to pretend otherwise, knew that the truth was bitter and that the universe was cruel, crueller than she had ever thought possible. And yet it was true, no matter how much she had wished for it otherwise.

She had never thought Shiro would break his promise. That he would ever leave her, even somewhat willingly. Not like this. It wasn't supposed to be like this. But she'd been wrong, and he had paid the price for it.

"Shiro," she sobbed, because she hadn't been able to save him. Not when it had mattered the most. "I'm sorry."

Chapter End Notes

and with this, s2 is over. i'll be taking maybe a week break just to make sure everything in s3 is figured out as it needs to be before it plows ahead. and just a reiteration: this story is going the direction of black paladin allura while shiro is gone (and he is returning, obviously) and s3 diverges wildly from canon so... we're really making our own forest, now. thank you for all following me this far. we have quite a road ahead <3
A New Age

Chapter Summary

Team Voltron mourns. The Galra Empire faces a new age.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARC IV: Blackout

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: A New Age

The priests chanted, and Lotor rolled his eyes. He stood at the front of the crowd of watchers, as the procession of soldiers and generals went by the silver streets of Zadai, the priests, garbed in Galra black, leading the way. The generals, some of those he recognized as the most important in his father's empire, held a platform above their heads at the front of the procession. The platform carried his father's mecha suit, fine silk from colony Zaal draped over it. Lotor had never liked his people's secondary homeplanet of Zadai much—nor did he ever like leaving the colonies he oversaw, in the Southern Fraction—much less for something as frivolous as this.

"Is this really necessary, mother?" he said, as the woman hovered over his shoulder. "You know as well as I do that father is not dead yet."

Lotor had seen the chamber his mother had taken his father to, deep in her private quarters and laboratories on central command, one of the only places that hadn't been damaged by Voltron's attack. He'd been keyed up on quintessence, alight with traces and glows of his wife's alchemy, and hanging on by a thread. But still, Zarkon was alive, even if Lotor had seen his mother weep like he wasn't, and that should have meant they weren't having a funeral procession on the most prestigious homeworld the Galra had left.

Haggar pressed her lips thinly together, her voice low. "Do not speak of that here. It will take fourteen weeks for the news to reach all corners of the Empire, fourteen weeks of mourning. Then, preparations for the Kral Zera can prepare. It is important to maintain tradition."

"So we don't appear weak," Lotor realized, still nettled.

If the Empire was too busy with ritualistic mourning, then they wouldn't be plotting to take the throne, they way they might if they thought their Emperor was weak rather than dead. Attacking a weakened opponent was always fair game—it was how they had conquered planets like Zaal in the first place, back when it had been named something other than Zaal—but making a power move when your opponent was dead was dishonourable. Anyone who wanted to make a play for the throne had to wait for the right time, for victory at Kral Zera, to be accepted by the Galra as the true successor.

Haggar nodded, the corners of her mouth twitching upwards. "I knew you would understand, my son."
It didn't dissuade Lotor's annoyance. "So I must play the part of a grieving prince for fourteen weeks?"

"Frown not," Haggar urged, and placed a scraped hand on her son's shoulder. "You can use this time to look into our most recent sightings. I trust your Generals are hard at work. She cannot hide forever, and once found, and she will walk your father back from his grave. Soon, we will hunger no more."

Lotor flicked an eye over to one of the priests, his mother's favourite Druid, Tamlin, chanting in the front, incense frothing from underneath her ghostly mask. Her robes were darker black than the rest, trimmed with purple, and yellow slits for eyes. If his sister had been here, it would have been her in Tamlin's place, chanting about a new age for the glory of the Galra empire.

"Yes well," said Lotor idly, not unaware that his mother would chide him for speaking her name aloud, but merely uncaring. If Haggar was going to make him stay here, he had to have a little fun with it somehow. "Merla never did look good in black."

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"Anything?"

Keith drew his tired eyes away from the emptiness of space, Red crooning a concerned rumble through their link, as Keith shifted the controls slightly at the sound of Coran's voice. "No," he said, his voice as hollow as he felt. He closed his eyes and breathed in Red. His Lion, at the very least, was always here for him. "I'm heading back now," he promised, and switched off the commlink. For the first few weeks, he'd kept it switched on the whole way through, but he couldn't bear it now, instead choosing to run his thumb mindlessly over one of Red's joysticks. "C'mon girl," he said wearily. "Let's go home."

Although how much the Castleship was home now, he wasn't sure.

Red drifted and docked in her hangar, and Keith took his time taking off his helmet once he walked down her ramp, her mouth opened and lowered to let him by. He tucked his helmet under his arm and patted his Lion on the nose before leaving and finding Allura and Coran on the bridge, their scanners open.

"Anything?" he asked this time, and neither Altean glanced back at him when he walked in.

"No," Allura sighed, as he walked to stand between them. "The others are coming back. They..." Her brow creased. "They have not found anything yet either."

"The Paladins covered a good deal of ground today," Coran smiled, even if it didn't reach his eyes. "And Pidge has already calculated where we should search tomorrow."

The furrow in Allura's brow deepened, but then her eyes snapped up, her mouth a thin, hard line. "Comm me if anything changes. I should go prepare for my conference with the Olkari."

"Princess," said Coran, before she left, "make sure you eat afterwards."

Allura gave him a small nod and an even smaller smile. "I will," she said, and even Keith could tell it was an easy lie, as the doors closed behind her.

"The Olkari?" he said, as he and Coran watched the Yellow Lion touch down in her hangar, and then Green and Blue. "I thought we were going to have a gathering of all the Voltron Alliance. Why is it just Queen Ryner now?"
Coran stroked his mustache. "It's been weeks without Voltron and the Alliance is starting to question it. That, and our lack of answers about..." He cleared his throat. "We received a notice from the Taujeerians early this morning. They're pulling out of the Alliance. Allura's finagling the finer details with Queen Ryner now. She doesn't want to leave them completely without aid, but as a former member, we cannot do the same for them we would have otherwise, and they've already grown dependent on Olkari technology."

Keith connected the dots, his hair falling in front of his narrowed eyes. "If they leave, you're worried the Olkari will go with them." Anger flared in his chest. "Those cowards, Shiro's missing for just a little while, and they're already willing to give up on him—"

"It has been over a month," Coran reminded him, and held up his hands when Keith glared at him. "I'm not saying they're right to—I wish they would stay—but well, their words were 'there's not much point in a Voltron Alliance with no Voltron' and... they had a bit of a point."

"Well they'll just have to get over themselves," Keith grumbled, "because there is no Voltron without Shiro, and he's out there, and we're gonna find him." His scowl deepened. "If Allura would just let us search in longer stretches—"

"You know she doesn't want to deplete the Lions too much, in case there is an emergency, with how much energy we've diverted to trying to get Black to—"

"Whatever." Keith turned away and started towards the door. He'd go smash some training bots, now that their search was done for the day. Coran could tell the others he'd gotten back.

"Keith."

He slowly wheeled around to face the Altean advisor, and raised an unimpressed brow. "Yes?"

"I've tried, but..." Coran sighed. "Try to get the princess to eat something, later?"

Keith looked as though he'd swallowed something very bitter, before he caught his reflection in one of the holoscreens. "She can take care of herself," he said roughly, and left.

His eyes stung as he walked down the hallway. If Shiro had cared a bit more about himself, and less about Allura, then maybe he'd still be around now. Why did no one see that but him?

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"Hey," said Lance slowly, as he walked onto the bridge with Hunk and Pidge close behind. "Where's Keith?"

"Off brooding I'm sure," Coran said with an air of pointed, disapproving grace. "He didn't even sound off."

"Off brooding I'm sure," Coran said with an air of pointed, disapproving grace. "He didn't even sound off."

Pidge sighed and typed Keith's name into the sign-off log, along with their own and the coordinates each paladin had searched.

"I'm sure we'll see him at dinner," Hunk said. "Which Pidge: you're on KP with me tonight. Goo deluxe."

Pidge didn't look pleased, but followed him out, and Lance glanced at Coran. The holoscreens blinked before them, as the new coordinates Pidge had put in were added to the others, and the algorithm updated itself. They'd made it with Allura's help, as her life force was connected to the Lions, and therefore to each of the paladins. With the Black Lion having gone silent, however, her
connection to Shiro's lifeforce had been weakened as well. Keith had snapped at her for it, before Lance had snapped at him, and the princess had given as wide an area to search as possible. Pidge's used the search for quintessence to latch onto Shiro's, a more complicated measure than their 'Galra' finder, but so far...

"There's really no news on Shiro?" Lance said.

"Sometimes no news is good news," Coran said quietly.

Lance's nose wrinkled. "How'd you figure that?"

"It keeps hope alive, in a way that a final answer may not."

Lance's throat closed up. "You mean, so we don't know he's dead."

Coran turned towards him. "No," he said hurriedly, "I merely meant that—"

Lance peeled himself away. "I'm going to go find Keith."

"Lance—"

But the Blue Paladin didn't look back. Coran sighed, and slowly resigned himself back to his screens. He couldn't blame the paladins for having faith—they were young, and had never lost a friend before. Or at least, in Keith and Pidge's cases, had never accepted the loss as real, even in the face of overwhelming earthing evidence. And they'd been right, of course, but still—Coran knew that if he was having doubts, Allura must have been as well.

Coran largely suspected the main reason she was letting the searches continue was because she had loved him, Shiro, and Coran couldn't begrudge her that. If he had thought there was something left to find of Alfor, besides stardust or ash, he'd...

Coran closed the the record log, after in his time stamp. "Coran," he said quietly. His voice echoed in the empty bridge. "Signing off."

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Lance found Keith in the Black Lion's hangar, standing by the silent Lion's paw. "What are you doing?"

Keith turned around and scrubbed at his face, his shoulders haunched inward and creasing his jacket. "Nothing," he said, coughing. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Lance slowly stepped towards him. "This is where you come, then? Every day? After your section's done." Keith stayed silent and turned away. Lance sighed. "You run when you're upset, Keith. But you can't run away from this. And you don't need to. We're going to find him."

Keith sunk down next to the Lion's cold paw, and Lance bent himself to sit beside him, their knees brushing. "How can you be so sure?" Keith asked glumly.

Lance gave him a half smile. "You're seriously giving up? Who are you, and what have you done to Keith Kogane—"

Keith socked him on the shoulder, but it wasn't a hard hit. "I'm not giving up on him," said Keith. "He's the one person who never gave up on me. I won't do that to him. But... you're sure he's okay?"
"Of course he is," said Lance easily. "He's Shiro. He's a survival master. It's what he does. He might come back with another scars and some more white hair—maybe he and Allura will even match—" Keith puffed out a laugh. "But he'll come back. He always does."

"Yeah." Keith cleared his throat. Ducked his head and shook himself, as though his doubt had been stupid. "Yeah, of course he will. So, uh, where are the others?"

"Allura's at her conference. Pidge and Hunk are making dinner, and Coran is doing... Coran things, I guess. Why?"

"Nothing, just... when I first heard the door open I thought it might be Pidge."

"Oh, yeah. I think they're trying to give you some space, but..."

"Yeah, just with—both of us looking for our brothers."

Lance snorted. "You really don't know how to handle having more than one person care about you at a time, huh?" He placed a hand on Keith's shoulder. "You gotta get this in your head, man. We're in this together. All of us, as a team. Including Shiro."

A slow smile crept over Keith's face. It was small, but a smile nonetheless. "Yeah. Like... like a family."

Lance thumped him lightly on the back. "Exactly, buddy. You and me and Hunk and Pidge, and Coran and Allura, and Shiro. We're all we have out here. We're gonna make it out in one piece."

Keith was silent for a moment, and then guessed, "Hunk's almost done dinner by now?"

"Probably, if he's wrangled Pidge into helping with the goo stew." Lance got to his feet and offered Keith a hand. "You ready to go?"

Keith took it and pulled himself up. "Sure. I've never had brothers, or a sibling, before. It'll be nice."

A strange twinge went off in Lance's gut at the thought of being Keith's brother, but he shrugged it off. It was just because they were still rivals, sort of. Even if the man they'd both been trying to impress was gone. "Oh, you don't know the half of it," Lance said, injecting cheer into his voice, because it was the closest he'd seen Keith come to being something other than melancholic in weeks. "This one time, my brother Luis..."

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"Yes," Allura said, once her heart had caught up with her head. She had to respond, dammit. "Yes, of course, Queen Ryner. I understand completely."

"Good." The queen's stern face flickered, as did the holoscreen it rested upon. "I am sorry for your Black Paladin," she amended. "He was a good man."

"Yes." Allura's smile faltered. "He was."

Ryner nodded. "Until next time, princess."

"Until next time." The smile left her face as soon as the holoscreen was gone, and Allura rubbed a hand over her weary face. Somewhere, vaguely, she felt her stomach grumble, demanding food, but she pushed that ache of hunger away in favour of focusing on a new one. She couldn't deny the truth of Ryner's words. She'd let the searches go on long enough. Too long, if she was being honest with
herself.

But the galaxy needed Voltron, and so did the Alliance, and so did the war. The Galra would not be kept tempered by ritual mourning for long.

Her eyes stung underneath her closed lids, and she willed the tears not to fall.

It was time to say goodbye, and that was how Allura found herself in front of his door while the rest of the team must have been at dinner, glad that even if Coran came to her chambers he would find them as void of life as she felt right now. Her leaden fingers typed in the passcode to Shiro's room.

She could still remember showing it to him, that first night in the Castle, a good varga after everyone else had retired, except for Coran who'd continued plugging away at mainframe wires. The way Shiro's shoulders had stiffened when he'd seen her type in the passcode, and the swishing open of the doors. He had been a prisoner, she'd remembered. And now she was asking him to fight again.

_The doors do not lock_, she'd said quietly.

He'd started. _What?_

_Not unless you will them too. And the key will be your hand. You will not have to type in the passcode. The room is yours_, she'd elaborated. _You are free to do with it as you wish._

His eyes had told her he'd understood. _Thank you, princess._

She'd bowed her head. _Of course. Goodnight, Shiro._

_Goodnight princess._

The room was cold as she stepped in, so unlike the warmth of his eyes. Of his touch. Dust particles floated in the air. No one had been in here since he'd disappeared, and the room hadn't been used that much even when Shiro had been around. The doors closed quietly, and Allura shivered, alone. She'd never been in here before, and it had suddenly became increasingly, uncomfortably apparent.

Maybe she had come to this room once, once when the Castleship had hosted dances and parties and she'd stayed up laughing late with her friends. Maybe it had been another one of the rooms the paladins were staying in (they all looked the same, after all). It was hard to tell, but the speculation distracted her from the grief, and the stinging of her eyes. It was due to the dust particles, she told herself firmly, and moved forward.

Shiro's room was simple: a bed that had the sheets done up perfectly, or perhaps that was because it had been rarely slept in. Once, after healing the Balmera and she had been unable to sleep, she'd found him lying on the floor in the lounge. He'd leapt up, embarrassed, but she'd only offered him an Altean drink, yunvil, that he'd compared to something called tea, and had coaxed the answer out of him. _The bed's too soft_, he'd admitted in a mumble. She'd supposed after sleeping on a prison floor for a year, any luxury would be hard to adjust too. He had, though, she knew. He'd told her later, one morning on Olkarion, when he'd finally settled into his room there, and the silken sheets they'd all been given.

He was never coming back.

At first, came the rage, the same rage that had come in the face of seeing the empty cockpit, the way her nails had dug into his chair and Coran had been the only one strong enough to pry her away. Then the plaguing emptiness, and she was suddenly glad her stomach was empty. Otherwise, she would've felt even more nauseous.
He was never coming back.

It was all she had the strength to do, to haul herself onto his bed and burrow in the sheets. There was no warmth in them, slightly musty from dust, but there was a hint of his scent underneath. Some sort of aftershave, a steadiness (if that could be a scent).

Allura sobbed until she fell asleep that night, and slept in his bed. It was the most peaceful sleep she'd had since he'd disappeared.

It was the only in the morning, when her hand was pushed under his old pillow as she yawned, that she found what had been hidden underneath it.

:::

Lotor lay a hand upon his cheek, bored. He'd been taken to the Dark Tower, Zadai's capitol, for the first week of mourning, which required being indoors at all time. He missed his colonies, the sun and the servants. His parents had spent so little time anywhere other than their flying central command that etiquette had clearly fallen by the wayside. He would have to fix that with a firm hand, once he was emperor. And make sure he would never have to 'mourn' someone again.

His glazed eyes slid from a fixed point in the wall of his chambers—purple, like the rest of it, and almost as luxurious as his quarters back in the Southern Fraction—to the ticking clock. One of his mother's antique old inventions. He might've thought she'd left it here for him as a sort of present if it wasn't such a poor one. His commlink beeped and he pressed the button to let it through.

At least Acxa was punctual as usual.

"Sire," his general greeted.

"You better have some good news for me, Acxa," he drawled.

There was hesitation on the other end of the line. He pictured his four generals exchanging nervous looks. Ezor, with her long pink phlaranx and big, expressive eyes. Zethrid would suggest to punch something. Narti would stay silent, like always. Buffoons, all of them. He would've had Acxa work alone if the others weren't possibly valuable.

"I'm afraid not, sire," Acxa said slowly. "Sendak has been retrieved from the Northern Fraction, injured but intact. He has been notified of the emperor's passing and Zethrid collected intel that he plans to make a speech there, too, in honour of your father once the procession reaches him."

"Sendak," he repeated in a hiss.

Any trace of Lotor's good mood vanished, his eyes narrowed and pulse quick. He'd thought his old rival had been stupid enough to get himself captured and killed by the Paladins of Voltron, a bunch of backwater aliens from an unknown planet. Apparently not.

Lotor steepled his fingers together. Well, this would complicate things. But no matter. He could handle them quietly, and although his mother might disapprove of his tactics, she would never hold it against him. Not that she would find out if he didn't want her to. A mother's love and trust in her son could often times be quite blinding.

"Acxa," he said. "Do you know where Sendak is, exactly?"

"No sire," she answered. "We know only that it was in the Northern Fraction, near the 0-8 Quadrant which isn't very well charted—"
It had been one of his father's newest conquered quadrants, Lotor remembered. Swampy and scarce in valuable resources, other than having as much quintessence as all planets did.

"Find him," Lotor ordered. "And do not report back to me until you have his exact coordinates."

"Yes sire," said Acxa quickly. "Vrepit sa!"

He turned off the commlink and rubbed at the pounding pulse in his temple, frowning. He'd preferred his life a tick ago, when his father's old favoured general suddenly wasn't a contestant for the throne. But, Lotor considered, flicking back his hair, that wouldn't be the case for long if he had anything to say about it.

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Allura could hear the paladins walking to the bridge before they got there, and took a deep breath. She'd given what she'd found under Shiro's pillow to Coran, her own hands too sweaty to hold them. He'd understood immediately, and in the expression that followed she thought she'd caught a glimpse of the grief he'd felt after she'd been sealed away and he'd watched her father leave.

He stood behind her now, a quiet presence. "It'll be alright, princess," Coran said gently, and she almost wanted to give him a small smile. She didn't know what she would do without him, but she didn't dare dwell on it. She didn't wait to tempt fate again.

The paladins strode into the room, all looking tired, and Hunk was yawning into his hand. Pidge was wearing Lance's jacket—he must've found the kid sleeping in the hall and still typing up coordinates sometime late last night—and Keith looked like he had actually gotten some sleep for the first time in weeks. Allura didn't know what had changed it, but she dreaded the thought of changing it back.

Still, being a commander meant doing the things you dreaded, and this was epitome of it.

"I've called you all here for an important announcement," she began.

"Are we searching somewhere new?" Lance said hopefully. "Like, a whole new galaxy?"

"No—" Allura said.

Pidge raised their sleeve covered hand but didn't wait to be called on. "Are we not able to head out today?"

None of them had been drifted for missions except here and there, the mourning Empire and fighting Blades of Marmora making up for it. Allura's gut churned as Lance momentarily speculated about the new quadrant they might be sent to, and tugged his jacket back on.

"The Voltron Alliance, as you know," Allura continued, and smoothed her face over as the paladins fell silent, "has allowed us to be rather stagnant already for quite some time. But that time is now over. The Alliance needs Voltron. The galaxy does. And we cannot be what they need unless we are in active duty, and—" She faltered for only a moment. "And with a new Black Paladin."

Shock was slapped across all their faces, and then Keith's brow bent. "What?"

Allura tried not to look away too quickly. "Coran, the chips, please."

Her advisor passed over the nine small chips, each colour coded, and she held them out in her hands towards the paladins. "I know that this is hard," she said, swallowing, "but I hope that these messages left by Shiro can ease it. We all know that he would be the first to say that we must carry
on the fight—"

"What do you mean, carry on the fight?" Keith growled. "There is no Voltron without Shiro—"

"Yeah!" agreed Lance. "He's out there and we can't just leave him—"

"Allura," Pidge tried, "the galaxy is huge, just give us a bit more time—I'll make my finder more accurate, I just need more data—"

The princess held the messages out a little farther, and gave them a slight shake. "If we have not found Shiro after all this time, I doubt... Lions have mourned their paladins in the past. The Black Lion has not awakened. Her responses are in line with what happens once a paladin has d—"

Keith jabbed a finger at her. "NO! Shiro is the one person who never gave up on me, I won't give up on him—he wanted me to fly the Black Lion and I'll make it work and I'll find him—I won't stop until I find him—"

He turned on his heel and rushed out of the room, breathing fast and hard, and Allura watched him go until Pidge took a step forward. "We better go after him," the teen mumbled. Somehow Keith's grief had muted all the other's.

Allura remembered herself, and blinked back tears. "Yes, yes of course." She went to tuck the messages in her pocket and take a step forward, when Hunk held up his arm.

"It should... probably be just us, princess," he said. There were tears in the corner of his eyes, but his voice was steady, if a tad awkward.


Lance looked between her and door, and then something like a switch seemed to flick on behind his eyes. "Princess, can we all have our messages? And Keith's?"

She blinked. "Yes." She held out each of the paladins'—yellow scotch tape for Hunk, green for Pidge, red for Keith and blue for Lance—and held the other half in her hand. The remaining ones were labelled Family, Adam, Coran, Thace Maala in white tape, and Shiro must've run out and used black tape and a white writing utensil to write down her name, Allura. She held her own closest to her chest and watched the paladins leave.

Before, she had thought herself close to them. But now, in the wake of Shiro's absence, it was clear how little the team had been hers, and how much they had been his.

She refused to look up at Coran and pulled up a holoscreen, started typing in a call to the Blade for a conference. They'd need to help out with Marmora missions. Deliver Shiro's message for Thace Maala. She'd check the libraries for resources with finding a new Black Paladin soon, if she didn't—

Allura wiped hastily at her eyes. No matter. It would all be fine. Besides: she had a war to win.

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Keith had tried to reach out to the Black Lion before, of course, since Shiro had been gone, but all he'd felt was Red's low, solemn rumbling. That couldn't be the case now. He wouldn't let it be. Shiro had wanted this for him, Shiro needed him—this could be the key to bringing him home—

He rushed to the Black Lion's hangar and placed his hands on the Lion's paw, then her shut and lowered jaw. 'Black, it's me, Keith. I know I'm not Shiro, but you have to let me in. I can help you
save him, and find him, okay? That's all I want. I just want to save him. So open up, okay?"

The Black Lion's eyes remained grey and sparkless. Her jaw did not move.

Keith's hands turned to fists against the cold metal—and the Lions never felt cold.

"Come on, Black please. Please work! Come on!" Keith's voice broke when the Black Lion stayed silent. "He said he wanted me to pilot you if anything happened and just—he chose me! He saved me! So just freaking choose me so I can save him, COME ON, PLEASE WORK! PLEASE—"

"Keith—"

No, not them—but then hands were grabbing him, trying to pull him away from the Lion. "No, no —" he whirled around, eyes flashing. "Let go of me, Lance!"

Then larger, stronger hands: Hunk, who was successful this time around in pinning Keith's arms to his sides. "Buddy, you gotta breathe—just breathe, Keith—"

Keith went limp and let Hunk hoist him to the ground. He was breathing like he'd run a marathon, and there was a stitch in his chest, but Keith didn't think it would go away once he caught his breath. Hunk slowly crouched beside him. "Hey, buddy," he said softly. Lance stood over his shoulder.

Pidge crouched on his other side. "You breathing?"

"Yes," he said, and threw them an annoyed glare.

"Just checking."

Keith wiped at his nose with his sleeve. "What are all of you doing here, anyway?"

"We thought—" Lance started, and sighed. "I thought, we could, well—" He took out the four messages from his jacket pockets. "We could listen to all of these, together."

Keith hunched in his shoulders. "You don't want to hear what Shiro has to say about me. He thought I could be Black's paladin. If he was wrong about that, what else is he wrong about?"

"Nothing," said Pidge shortly. "My dad and Matt thought they'd be safe going into space, and they were wrong, but that doesn't mean they were wrong about me and what all the things I'm capable of. And once they went missing, I would've done anything to have a piece of them leftover, so—" They reached over and took their message from Lance's pocket, and plugged it into their datapad. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm going to listen to mine. The holoscreen slowly loaded up. "And you can too."

Keith sat up, and leaned against the Lion's paw. Hunk, Pidge, and Lance settled around him. He kicked out his legs and sniffled when Shiro's hologram showed up. He was sitting at a table of some kind—maybe the one in this very hangar—and had his fingers folded together and a smile on his face.

"Hey, Pidge," Shiro greeted. "If you're receiving this, well... I'm sorry I won't be able to help you look for your dad and Matt anymore. But I know you can. You're a great paladin and a great kid, and smarter than just about everyone I know—except maybe Hunk, but I'm sure he already knows that. Just know that you can do it, and anything you put your mind to—"

One by one they listened to each message, until Keith swallowed his shame and put his on, and they listened—and looked at Black, who didn't perk up even as Shiro encouraged Keith to try and
connect with the Lion—and stayed there until the castle's daycycle was over. Until they fell asleep in a mess of arms wrapped around each other's shoulders with tear stained cheeks pressed against them.

Coran found them close to midnight and draped blankets over their shoulders, with Shiro's own message to him tucked away in his breastpocket. He hadn't listened to it yet, but he imagined he already knew what the sum of it contained: take care of Allura.

:::

"I'm sorry," Thace Maala said slowly, once he and Lira had docked at the Castleship the next morning. She'd opened up a wormhole to quicken their travel. "For your loss."

Allura handed over the message. "Yes. We're all bearing it best we can."

Lira's head lifted when she saw the paladins enter the hangar over Allura's shoulder, her face still masked, although their faces lit up a little at the sight of her, Keith and Lance's especially.

She looked at her uncle. "Thace, may I—"

Thace smiled slightly. "Go."

Lira went and took off her mask, greeting the paladins with a sad smile. Her hair was shorter. There was a new healing scar on her cheek. Clearly the last month of war had taken its toll on her too.

"Princess," Thace said, his voice lowered, and Allura turned her attention back to him. "Forgive me, if I'm overstepping, but Lira told me about you and the Black Paladin, and I..." Thace's fingers tightened over the chip. "I know how hard it is to lose a lover."

Allura gave him a strained smile. "Thank you. But I'm fine, really."

Thace nodded, and walked over to Keith. They had met only once after everything, when Thace was in the Marmora medbay on their new makeshift base.

Allura wondered how many more times she would tell that lie, before the war was over.

Chapter End Notes

just want to say this is not the last time the messages will be relevant, and we will get to hear the entirety of all of them as time goes by. this chapter is very much setting the stage for the rest of the season, but i hope you've enjoyed it nonetheless.
The Heart of Voltron (I)

Chapter Summary

A crystal from a planet is needed to awaken the Black Lion. Allura struggles with some hard choices.

Chapter Notes

given that thace never had enough screentime to really have a personality, i worked with what i had from transcripts and also by building the sort of person i think would end up with ulaz. also, as a very different type of uncle for keith than kolivan. enjoy

ARC V: Honour

CHAPTER NINETEEN: The Heart of Voltron (I)

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When the paladins ambled onto the bridge the next morning, Allura could tell something had shifted. They stood closer to each other, for starters, and although Keith frowned at her when their eyes met, the anger had been washed away from his face. Allura felt herself unfold, just a little, as the paladins came closer.

"You said you had something to tell us?" said Pidge.

Allura nodded slowly. "Yes. I know that you were not keen on my idea the day before—but I do believe it is the best step forward. And given the information that Keith revealed, as well as our own messages from Shiro, I believe it best for Keith to attempt to bond with the Black Lion. It will be less of an adjustment for the Lion. She will at least have had him in her head, if only by extension of Red."

"I don't think that's a good idea, princess," Keith said quietly. "I've tried to reach out to the Black Lion. She's never responded—"

"And I think I've found a way to awaken her, again. For the ten millennia she slept in the Castle, she was silent. All the Lions needed time to recharge after the battle with Zarkon. It makes sense that the Black Lion would need more time than the others. But Haggar's magic corrupted the bayard Hunk constructed, after the first hit. The Lion may still be tainted, and we can help cleanse her. Then, she should awaken."

"Okay," said Hunk slowly. "And how do we do that? With Altean alchemy?"

"Close," she said. "We need a crystal, not unlike the Balmera's—although we are not going to the Balmera," she added apologetically to him. After the battle with Zarkon, Shay had left Olkari and gone back with her family to help replete and harvest more of her planet's crystals. Hunk had been
missing her dearly since, too. "There is an ice planet called Eidolon that holds the revival crystal we need. They were allies of Altea in ancient times."

Hunk caught her tone. "But not anymore?"

She gave him a small smile. "Coran and I have already done a little research. It is not Galra occupied, but not aligned with any free planets. They shouldn't be volatile once we land, but we don't know for sure."

"Well," Hunk considered, "that's more accurate than when you told me and Lance the Yellow Lion was on a 'peaceful' planet."

"And once we awaken the Black Lion?" asked Pidge.

Allura drew up her shoulders. "We look for a new Black Paladin. Whether the Lion accepts Keith as Shiro wanted, or not, we must form Voltron again and continue our fight against the Galra Empire."

"It shouldn't be me, as Black Paladin," said Keith. His eyes were like fire, steady but raging. "It should be you, princess."

Her white brows rose, but it was Pidge who spoke. "But Keith, our messages said—"

"I know what they said," he said roughly. "But Allura's a leader, and since she's the only who wants to replace Shiro, then she should be the one who has to."

"Wait hold on," said Lance, glaring at him, "no one is replacing Shiro."

"Yes," said Allura, her shoulders deflating a little, "thank you, Lance—"

"No," the Blue Paladin said. "No one is replacing him, because no one else is going to become the Black Paladin. Shiro is still out there, somewhere. If our situations were switched, would he give up on any of us? Would he stop looking?" A guilty silence ensued. "When Allura got captured, he didn't care about the risk." Lance rounded on her. "He put you above the universe. How can you not do the same for him?"

Allura's throat went dry. "I—I thought it was a decision you all made together, and—I am required, to power the Castleship—" She looked back at Coran, but he turned away.

"Don't get me wrong," said Pidge, "we all wanted go back for you." Keith lowered his eyes. "But Shiro was the one leading the way. He would've gone back for you. With or without us."

Allura's eyes burned. "And I am not saying that we can no longer look for him at all," she said tightly, "but it cannot be our main priority—"

"Look, I get that moving on is your main priority right now, Allura," Hunk said rather gently. "But that doesn't mean its ours. We miss him and we want to—"

"YOU DON'T THINK I MISS HIM?" The lights flashed, and she jerked her hands away from the controls, shame crumbling in her chest and getting caught in her throat. The paladins stared back at her with saddened, shocked faces. Angry tears burst in her eyes. "I loved him—I loved him just as much as the rest of you, and now he's—" She cleared her throat and straightened up, her voice cold. "I will not have let him die in vain," she said, an edge to every word. "So I will carry on the fight, and I will do it, with or without your help."

"Princess," said Coran, his voice quiet, "there's an incoming message from the Blades?"
Allura turned away from the paladins, and drew up her composure. "Let it through. I'll see what concerns they have, and then I'll open the wormhole to Eidolon."

She was glad when she managed to keep her head clear, as she and Kolivan talked, even if it took more focus than it should have. The commander started when she told him of her plan.

"Eidolon has remained neutral," Antok said, from his place by Kolivan's side. "They will not take kindly to a decidedly non-neutral party using their planet's resources."

"They were Altea's allies before the war," she countered. "And one crystal will not be much noticed. We hope to be in and out rather quickly."

"Well if you are throwing caution to the wind," said Kolivan, "perhaps we can join you. We have begun construction on our base, but my brother's rather eccentric plans requires a crystal. Would you mind if Thace accompanied you?"

"Are you sure he's ready to?" she asked. Keith had asked about Thace, once Kolivan had ushered him from the medbay a few days after the battle with Zarkon. Rehabilitation and healing after a deep undercover mission, especially one that was long-term, usually took over a month, with smaller missions happening in the meantime.

"He will not have to do much except choose the correct crystal. Lira is being assigned for his protection."

Allura nodded. "Very well. Are you at the same coordinates as before? I can wormhole them here shortly."

Kolivan inclined his head. "That would be appreciated, princess. We will call again once the mission on Eidolon is complete."

"Until then, commander."

"Until then," Kolivan repeated, "princess."

She felt eyes on her, and turned to see that the paladins had never left, instead staring at her blankly. She swallowed hard, and put her mask back on. "Well?" she ventured. If they had something to say, then they should say it now.

"So," said Keith, his voice a little hoarse and head lowered, as though in defeat, "when are we going to Eidolon?"

:::

Eidolon wasn't any warmer up close. Coran had given them a run down of the planet once they wormholed into its solar system, before drifting closer. It sat in the space farthest it could from its sun without losing the ability to host life. Most of the planet was tundra and the locals ate mostly meat as a result. The growing and melting seasons were short and large creatures roamed the icy plains and plunged their hands to grab the varied sea creatures swimming below the thick stretches of ice.

"Like a yeti," Hunk had said, surely referencing some kind of earthling creature and nudging Lance, but the boy remained moody. He was the only teammate, since Keith's statement, to not make some contribution towards the game plan of going to Eidolon. Allura hoped Lira coming back would brighten his mood.

Thace and Lira's shuttle appeared from a wormhole a few ticks once Coran's debrief was finished,
and they docked in the designated hangar for the Blades. If they hadn't been in un-Allied space, Allura would have let the paladins go down to greet the two, but for now she wanted all of them at their stations and had made it clear. It didn't take long for Lira and Thace to walk onto the bridge regardless, the latter limping slightly.

"Anything we need to be aware of?" asked Thace, once he and Keith exchanged quick smiles and the teen looked away first. He didn't seem to know what to do with his nicer uncle. Kolivan, at the least, was gruff and easy to navigate so long as you weren't searching for his approval. (Which Keith didn't seem to be, but there hadn't been much time, since losing—)

"As Eidolon is decidedly neutral," said Coran, "they're likely to be more hostile towards any member of the Galra race than towards us. You should have at least one of the paladins with you at any given time, when engaging with them." His face brightened. "Better to be safe than sorry!"

"And their strengths?" said Lira. "Weaknesses?"

"We're at a disadvantage in that regard," Allura said. "The Red and Green Lions will be especially effected by the extreme cold of the planet. As a result, only Yellow and Blue are fully functional at the moment. They do not need to know that, however."

"We're good at keeping secrets," Lira promised, shifting her weight, and something seemed to shift behind her eyes as well. As though she knew something Allura didn't.

Now wasn't the time to press it, though, as the princess brought the Castle through the planet's atmosphere and towards the landing zone—the thickest stretch of ice, close to the largest settlement on the planet—and saw black dots moving across the icy plains. She just hoped they wouldn't greet the Castle with immediate hostility. It would be far more complicated to get the crystal to awaken the Black Lion, and if they couldn't—

She couldn't fail the Lion. Not again.

"Coran," she said, "open up a hailing frequency." She only had to wait a moment before speaking again, "Hail, people and planet of Eidolon. I am Princess Allura of Altea and the Voltron Alliance. I request permission to land and an audience with your ruling party."

The holoscreen fanned out in front of her, and an Eidolon in a crown stared back at her. The Eidolon, who seemed to be male, had grey skin dappled with white, flabby and rather shiny looking and entirely hairless. His eyes were wide and glassy, dark, his nose a flattened slit with white skin around his mouth.

Allura saw Hunk nudge Lance in her peripheral vision. "Weird," Hunk whispered, but not very well, "they look a lot like seals—"

She would have turned back to reprimand them, if the prince wouldn't have been able to track the movement and he hadn't taken that moment to say, "Greetings, Princess Allura of Altea. I am Prince Dolan of Eidolon. What brings you to my planet?" His voice was somehow both wheezy and guttural, and she was just glad their species' dialect now hadn't changed too much in the 10,000 years since the Castle's universal translator had last filtered it.

"We are seeking an iko crystal," she said.

Prince Dolan looked past her shoulder, eyeing Thace and Lira, and then frowned. "You lead the fight against the Galra empire alongside its own rebel citizens. Giving you a crystal could be seen as an act of aid in a hopeless war. Why should we entrust our planet's resources to you?"
A great wide grey belly with a sparkling white belt bulging underneath bumped into the prince’s shoulder and nearly knocked him flat. "Dolan!" said a jovial voice, perhaps as admonishingly as that voice could manage. "I hope you’re being hospitable!"

Dolan rubbed at the side of his head that had been hit with a mostly flippered hand. "Father, we—"

His father leaned down, jutting a grey, friendly face into view that just seemed like a fatter version of his son’s. "Ah, Princess Allura," he said brightly, "it is wonderful to see you—we've heard so many things about you! I am King Eos, I hope my son was being pleasant. What brings you to our little planet?"

Allura stifled an amused laugh—she didn't want the king to think she was laughing at him, even if his nature made it very tempting to—and smiled broadly but professionally at him. "King Eos, it is lovely to meet you. My castleship seeks permission to land and one of your iko crystals. We need to restore a part of our tech and it is the only thing that can do so."

King Eos chuckled. "By all means, please, land. We are happy to host you in our palace—you must have some very interesting stories to tell!" He glanced over at Lira and Thace. "And I trust you’ll keep them under control?"

"They're not rabid animals," Lance said tersely, standing next to Keith.

Allura smoothed things over with a smile. "We already have a system worked out," she promised the king. "The Blades are our trusted allies. They will not harm you nor anything else you hold dear."

Eos grinned. Clearly he is easily pleased. "We will light up the landing strip, then," he said, and then nudged his son, "Isn't that right Dolan?"

The prince frowned. "Yes, father," he said.

Allura made a mental note to watch out for him once they landed. "Thank you, Your Majesty," she said, and loosed a breath once the call was over. She guided the Castle into a solid landing, and turned back to her team. "While we're on planet, keep your guard up. We don't know exactly what situation we're walking into, and Eidolon is neutral which means they are not aligned with us. The goal is not to convince them to be. The goal is to go in, get the crystals we need, and get out as quickly as possible. You are to tell no one what the iko crystal is for. We don't need anyone but the Blades and Queen Ryner knowing the Black Lion still isn't operational. Am I understood?"

"Yes, princess," said Hunk, and the others murmured in agreement.

"It doesn't seem like the Eidolons will be chatty with us anyway," said Thace.

"Good," Allura said, and turned back towards the horizon. The sky was grey and streaked with snow. "Let's go."

The palace was made of something more solid and opaque than ice, but colder and clearer than stone. Allura managed not to shiver as she led the paladins and the Blades towards the throne room, Eidolons with white spears escorting them. The rest of the team weren't as good at handling it, Keith and Pidge muttering to each other, their noses turning red and runny. Lance was more loudly morning the lack of heat, but he didn't seem to be quite as badly affected by the cold.

Allura hoped Coran could keep the heat going at the Castle, keep the Red and Green Lions warm. The paladins hadn't asked too much about the physical manifestations of their bonds with their Lions.
—and indeed Allura didn't know quite what to expect, given that there'd never been human paladins before—but she knew this was just the beginning. She wished Shiro was here. He'd bonded the most with his Lion, and faster than all of the others. If he'd been here, he would have been able to guide them through it. Show off the new abilities Black had given him following their defeat of Zarkon, assure the teens that this was something to be excited about.

Now, all they would have was her word, and she didn't know how much that was worth, anymore.

King Eos' throne was made of smooth black stone, and his son Dolan stood by his side. They both wore blue coats trimmed with gold, with sloping bellies (although Eos' was far larger) and no feet, but solid grey trunks. Tails. Keith had drawn some pictures of Earth creatures per the paladins' request before, and Allura did have to agree that they looked like seals, and not particularly threatening, either.

She didn't let her guard down though, as the speared escorts stopped and bowed their heads to their king, before taking their places along the wall.

"Ah, Princess Allura." King Eos spread his thick arms wide, welcoming. "And the paladins of Voltron, welcome, welcome. It has been a long time since we have had visitors."

"Not long enough," Dolan said under his breath.

Allura ignored him and looked at his father. "Thank you for your hospitality, King Eos." She dusted some snow off her shoulder. "We don't want to impose for long. Once we know the location of the iko crystal, we are happy to collect it ourselves, with your permission."

"I'm afraid the snowy plains look the same for someone who doesn't know our charts," King Eos said. "And most of our scouts and miners are already at the Core Mountains. You'll have to wait until nightfall when they arrive back, and can go early morning until then." He looked to the two now masked Blades. "Are there any other crystals you need?"

"A krun crystal, Your Majesty," said Lira, her voice stiff and garbled by her mask. "We seek it for our base of operations. We are in the process of rebuilding."

"Yes," Eos considered, growing solemn. "I heard that your ships were damaged in the fight against Emperor Zarkon's fleets." Not quite true, but Allura wasn't about to dispute him, as his eyes moved to her. "And of the demise of your Black Paladin. I am sorry. He was a good fighter."

Allura bowed her head and spoke around the rising lump in her throat. "Thank you, Your Majesty. He—he was." The room felt cold, suddenly, and she cleared her throat. "Are you sure we cannot find the crystals sooner? We do not want to overstay, and threaten your neutrality in the war."

"It will be no bother," the King assured her. "Our nightly snowstorms block out ship signals and commlinks. No one will know you are here until morning, and as you said, we are neutral. The Galra do not bother us, and they do not dare try to tame our tundra. They have too little patience for it."

She didn't dare say, but one day they will come for your planet's quintessence, and merely bowed her head again. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Your Majesty."

Her throat felt sore. She had talked too much diplomacy the past month or so. Usually Shiro had been the one to discuss with people on the ground, and he'd gotten rather good at it. But now there was no one to lean on. The war, the team, the Alliance and the Blades—who else could command and connect it all but her?

It was a relief to be dismissed, as an Eidolon in a simple white tunic—a maid, perhaps—led them to
their rooms for the night. The boys would be bunking together (she could already hear Keith and Lance bickering over who would have to share or be on the floor, but both were insisting Hunk should get a bed to himself) and her and Pidge. Allura flicked on her commlink to send a debrief of the situation to Coran, and then her lungs eased as she shut the bedroom door. The beds were small, or seemed to be, with large swathes of thick blankets swelling over the sides. At the very least, they would be warm.

Pidge sat atop their bed and let their legs swing over the side. Allura walked up behind them as they started taking off their paladin armour. "Are you feeling alright?" she asked.

"Fine." Pidge gritted their teeth though. "I don't know why I'm so cold—we've gone to where my mum's from in Ireland, Ulster, and there's lots of snow there and I was always fine—"

The princess placed a hand on their shoulder. She'd ask what Ireland and Ulster were later. "It is your bond with your Lion. Green is connected to nature. The cold and the planet's scarce vegetative state is affecting your Lion, and therefore affecting you. It's one of the reasons why Olkari seemed rejuvenating—and why Keith is so cold here, too. You are both greatly removed from your element."

Pidge thought for a moment, and then crossed their arms. "Well then why was Lance whining?"

Allura smiled slightly. "I don't think that, to borrow his phrase, as 'a boy from Cuba,' that he is fond of any cold."

Pidge snorted. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

How was they had all only just got on-planet, and it was already night with fatigue weighing over Allura's shoulders? Then again, she was always tired, these days. "Come along," she coaxed gently. "Let's get some rest."

:::

Nobody's mood was merry but King Eos when breakfast pleasantries continued to stretch on for half the morning. Allura had to keep stopping herself from yawning, not because it was boring (although it was, which was sometimes better then tensely navigated smalltalk) but because she had woken up a few times in the night to Pidge rapidly typing away, algorithms and code illuminating the paladin's pale face. Through blurry eyes Allura had caught sight of the chip with the Holts information she'd taken from Alpha-Traz, and Shiro's prisoner number flashing across the datapad:

No matter how many times Allura tried to direct the conversation back towards business—your crystal mines must be beautiful, Your Majesty, I can't wait to see them—it never stuck, even as she grew increasingly politer and her grip on her ice cold cutlery grew increasingly tighter.

It didn't help that Lira and Thace weren't allowed in, and when Keith had been exiled too for aligning himself with them, Allura had only hung onto her temper by a thread. She'd been about to argue more viciously, when Keith had grabbed her arm and shook his head, his eyes surprisingly steady for the fire raging behind them, and well—she'd trusted him.

Now it was time to take a bathroom break to see why he'd asked her to back down.

Allura pushed herself up from the table, aware of Dolan's eyes on her. It was amazing how silently disproving one prince could be. "Excuse me, I need to use the restroom."

She tried not to think about how much trouble her age-old out would be in as she moved into the adjoining hallway outside the banquet hall, even if she ever met an alien species that didn't need to
relieve themselves. The two Blades and one paladin were standing by some of the gilded frozen windows, their masks off, and they all turned to face her.

"I have a task for you," she said. "Thace, you know what the iko and krun crystals look like?"

Thace nodded. "Yes, princess."

"Good. Keith, I want you to take the Red Lion out with Thace. Your Lion will be fast enough to avoid the worst of the cold, and we cannot keep wasting time on this planet. Lira, you'll go stay in the Castle with Coran and cover for your uncle if need be." She nodded at Keith. "Be back before nightfall at the latest."

Keith gave her a smile that was a bit more of a grimace. "We'll meet you back at the Castle after storing the crystals?"

"I'll have Coran check back in," she confirmed. "He should just be doing system checks right now, trying to make sure the cold doesn't interfere too much with our commlinks."

"I might be able to help," offered Lira. "I know tech fairly well."

Allura nodded in approval. "Go."

They had disappeared down the hall, and she had lingered for maybe another five minutes, savouring the silence before she'd have to dive back into political niceties, when something hard slammed into her stomach and pinned her up against the wall. Shock marred the instinctive struggle of her limbs as she looked into the face of her attacker.

"Dolan?":::

"It shouldn't be much longer to the mountains," Thace reported, leaning over the back of Keith's chair. "The schematics of the planet I downloaded showed it's a only a little north of here. Not that far a journey from Eos' palace, with the right equipment."

"Weird he's making us take this long to get the damn crystals," Keith grumbled.

"It may be a culture thing. Some planets abound in hospitality. Or they may not think we can handle the terrain as well as we can."

"Whatever the reason, it's annoying."

Thace chuckled. "You sound like your uncle." Keith shifted his eyes to the horizon, and Thace's smile faded. "How is your Lion doing, anyway?"

"Red's managing. She's not going quite as fast as normal, but..." Keith shrugged. "She hasn't been the same since Black shut down, anyway. None of the Lions have."

Thace sighed. "Keith... I know how hard it is to lose a friend. A sibling. And I while can't speak to much to how things were when he was around—Lira says you even used to smile—but... you cannot let the grief swallow you whole. The message that Shiro left for me... made clear how much he loved you. He would've wanted you to be brave, and strong, and happy. It's all he wanted for all of you."

"I don't want to talk about this, uncle," Keith said quietly.
Thace clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "I'm sorry. I did not intend to drag you down."

"It's fine." Keith cleared his throat, and a long stretch of silence amid an endless snowy horizon ensued, before he said, "There was really nothing about Mom, at central command?"

"Nothing," Thace confirmed, sadness tinging his features. "As far as the Galra Empire is concerned, Orilla Maala never existed. But that does mean they don't think she's dead. The Galra keep records of how many Blades they kill and capture, at cadets and generals who disappear strangely. It is the only way they can guess at our true numbers. Your mother may still be out there."

Keith's throat went dry, and he wished he still had the same sense of faith in regards to Shiro.

"Come on," he said, and coaxed his Lion to go faster with promises of a warm planet as their next destination, pushing it through their link. "Let's just go find the crystals."

:::

Allura kicked the seal prince away from her and readied her fists. "What in stars' name—"

"You need to get off this planet," snarled Dolan, flashing surprisingly sharp planet. "Or else terrible things will happen to you and your team."

She glared at him, waiting to see what he would do. "Is that a threat?"

"It is a promise, and—"

The doors to the banquet hall burst open, and the paladins strolled out."Thank God that's over," said Lance, stretching out his back with his hands on his hips. Allura and Dolan both straightened, a diplomatic mask slipping over her face even if the tenseness didn't leave her shoulders. She didn't dare step away from Dolan, even as he slipped away and slinked back towards the hall doors.

"Lance," she chided, as he was being far too loud and disrespectful, and now she could never be quite sure what he and the other paladins had interrupted now.

He frowned, but quieted. "What? It took forever." He glanced down to the hall to the window, and his brow furrowed. "Hey, where's Keith and Lira?"

"And Thace?" Hunk added.

Allura raised her voice so it would carry back to the hall, even as she glared daggers at Dolan's retreating back. How would he like it if she suddenly slammed him against a wall? She'd work out the kinks in her shoulder later. "I've sent them to the Castleship to work on our comms. We can meet them there, if you'd like. King Eos will send us our mine escorts in another varga or two."

"I hope that's alright princess," said King Eos as he strode out of the hall, Dolan slinking at his heels. "The weather is particularly bad today, very dense snowstorms. We don't want anything to risk jamming your comms, or freezing your ships out there in open exposure."

Allura bolstered up her thin smile. "Of course, Your Majesty. I completely understand. The paladins and Blades and I can more than keep busy at the Castleship, now, if you'll excuse us—" She grabbed Pidge's arm once they rounded the corner, and the paladins huddled around her. "Pidge, can you put a tracking sensor on Dolan's body heat?" she whispered.

"Uh, yeah," said Pidge with a pause. "Why?"
"He threatened me to get off the planet." Allura looked round at Pidge, Lance, and Hunk's faces. "We cannot trust them."

"And Keith and Thace and Lira are actually—?" said Hunk.

"I'll tell you on the way back to the castleship," she said, Pidge already typing away into their arm's datapad. "Let us leave, before they find another reason for us to stay."

:::

Lance had the easiest time brushing snow off his armour, and the first to find Coran and Lira on the Bridge. "How are the comms?" he asked, walking to stand in between them.

"Rather jammed," Lira replied, frowning.

"We're doing our best to get them back online," said Coran, looking from one holoscreen to the next. "But we can still find the Red Lion's signal fairly easily, and the comms should be fine as a flaxernaff in just a few ticks."

"Yes, that's very descriptive," said Hunk dryly, and Lira raised her eyebrows at him.

"You don't know what a flaxernaff is?"

Pidge plugged their datapad into the computer's Lion sensory, and started typing in code. "Could you keep it down? I've never had to account for seal blubber before."

"Indeed, there isn't much to actually do around here for now," Allura said, "beyond the training deck."

"What do you want us to do then?" Lance pouted. "Go outside and have a snowball fight?"

Lira perked up. "A snowball fight? What are the rules?"

"There are no rules," Lance said, but then hastily turned his frown back on Allura. "But that's not the point. Princess, you can't just let us do nothing while Keith is out there getting cool crystals—"

"If you really want something to do," said Allura, "then you could work with Hunk on making sure the bayard he constructed is properly purified of Haggar's dark magic. I can come check on it later and see if it needs any alchemy to complete the process." She glanced at Lira. "Lira, if you are going to be distracted, you might as well do so in the Blue or Yellow Lion's hangars."

Lira bowed her head slightly. "My apologies, princess," she said, and turned back to her screens. They made her eyes glow as she looked away from Lance. "I'll stay focused."

Lance shrugged under Allura's still terse gaze, and led the way to the Yellow Lion's hangar. Hunk brought the bayard onto his work desk, and together they wrestled the panels open. There was a crackle of black lightning, and then nothing. "It looks still corrupted to me," Hunk said.

Lance poked it with a tentative finger, and then jumped back when a drop of water landed on his head. "What the—?" He looked upwards, and saw water dripping from the ceiling in a small leak. Maybe the pipes had been overladen with keeping the castle's heater and all the snow and ice out. He'd mope to Coran about it later. He rubbed the soaked spot on his head, the hair that stuck up at the back now flattened, and glared up at the leak. Stupid leak.

He watched the water droplet recede back into it, and stared. Okay, now *that* was freaky. The cold
must have been getting to him.

"—Lance? Hello, earth to Lance? Anybody home?" Hunk's hand waved in front of his face and Lance wheeled his chair away from the leak. He heard it drip steadily beside him. Weird.

"Sorry," he said. "What do you need?"

His friend looked over at his toolbox, and a crease formed in Hunk's brow. "Nothing. just..."

Lance frowned and wheeled closer, before nudging him in the side. "Hey, aren't we fixing this thing?"

Hunk managed a small but weak smile. "I dunno. Should we?"

"Why wouldn't we?"

Hunk ran his fingers over the indent of his wrench. "It didn't work. It got corrupted by Haggar's magic and knocked Shiro unconscious, and if it hadn't..."

Lance placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, that wasn't your fault, buddy."

"It was my invention—"

"Shiro—" Lance swallowed tightly. "What happened happened because Shiro is a brave guy and Zarkon is a real messed up dude, and we're gonna get Shiro back. Your invention made him feel braver and it was a super cool idea. Of course it's worth fixing." Lance smiled. "Just like the rest of us."

Hunk glumly raised his head. "You really think so?"

"Yeah, I do."

Hunk looked back at the bayard on the table, his eyes intent. "I... I bet I could find a way to make it immune to dark alchemy. With some of Allura and Coran's help."

Lance clapped him on the back. "That's the spirit buddy. Hey, Shiro would want you to keep using that big brain of yours, right? He'd be proud."

Hunk slowly smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, he would." He reached over and pulled Lance into a hug. "Thanks."

Lance squeezed him back. "Hey, what are friends for? Now let's get to work, so we can brag to Keith how cool the thing we made is when he gets back."

The Yellow Paladin laughed and shook his head. "Yeah. Alright," he pointed to the section with pink wires, "let's start there."

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When Allura left the Bridge to go get some naffvil, Coran took it as an excuse to follow her. "You can manage things here on your own for a bit I'm sure," he said to Lira, and then left before the girl could disagree (not that he thought she would). He found Allura in the kitchen, pouring some of the hot brown liquid into a mug, even if her motions seemed to be on autopilot, and she looked up, glassy eyed and startled when he entered.

"Coran," she said, trying for a smile as the tenseness left her shoulders, even if the storminess didn't
"Leave her eyes. "Would you like a cup?"

"As a matter of fact I would," he said, and Allura held the pitcher up by the handle. "I believe Shiro referred to naffvil as coffee, yes?"

Her grip slipped slightly, and there was no denying that her face hardened as she poured him a mug. "Yes," she said, and passed the warm mug over. "He did."

Coran didn't bother taking a sip before he set it back down on the counter. "Princess," he said, "why won't you just fly the Black Lion? You know that you can. All the Lions are connected to your lifeforce. You can pilot any of them that you choose—"

"Yes, but I cannot be just any Lion's paladin," she retorted. "And you know as well as I do that Shiro wanted Keith to pilot the Black Lion in the even that he died. He must have had his reasons, and I trust those reasons. Besides, if the Black Lion responds to Keith as Shiro wished, then I will exercise my abilities over the Lions and follow in my mother's footsteps."

She knew the Red Lion could be temperamental, and wouldn't enjoy losing her boy, but they all had to make sacrifices in this war, didn't they? Shiro had.

"Allura," Coran said, finally managing to get her to look at him. "Why won't you pilot Black?"

Sharp tears welled in her eyes. "Because I don't want to be where he died, Coran! He was in that cockpit, in that seat when he died for us, because of my orders and—I can't set foot in there after everything. The one time I did was when he was gone and I can't—" Her shoulders hunched and tears rolled down her cheeks. "I can't—"

Coran pulled her into a hug and she sobbed into his shoulder. Once her cries had quieted, his hand rubbed soothing circles into her back, his voice quiet. "Whatever will happen will happen," he soothed. "But we both know that Keith is no leader, and that while Black loved Shiro as much as you did, she must do whatever is best for the team as a whole. Would you really ever be able to take regular orders from that boy?"

Allura pulled away and wiped at her face. "Coran—"

"Shiro may be gone," he said. "But that does not mean you have to stop being co-leaders. I can think of no better pilot in his absence than you, and I would be surprised if the Black Lion does not share the same sentiment." Coran took her by the shoulders and raised his brows. "Try, Allura? I think both you and the Black Lion would find it very beneficial."

Allura refused to look at him, and Coran squeezed her shoulders and then let go, but not before leaning forwards and kissing her forehead just below her circlet. "I'll go see what's happening on the Bridge. You can decide what to do from here."

Her advisor was already stepping away from her when Lance appeared in the doorway, Hunk speeding past him. Lira must have paged them.

Allura saw the stricken look on his face and swallowed. "Lance, what's wrong?"

His voice was grim, and in the beat before he answered they heard the wind howl outside, even from this deep in the Castle. "We lost the Red Lion's signal," he said. "And Keith's not back yet."
The Heart of Voltron (II)

Chapter Summary

Things on Eidolon take a turn for the worst. Lance confronts his grief and Allura makes a decision.

ARC V: Honour

CHAPTER TWENTY: The Heart of Voltron (II)

Allura stared at him. "What do you mean we've lost the Red Lion's signal?"

"It doesn't matter," Lance said, meeting her even gaze with one of his own. "I'm taking Blue and going after him. All the Lions are bound to each other. She should be able to connect—"

She frowned. "Lance, I don't think that's a good idea," she said, even as she wished she could give another answer. "It will only mean we'll have two paladins and two Lions lost in the storm instead of just one—"

"Allura." There was fear in his eyes too, and his voice cracked a little. It was the first time he hadn't looked even a little mad at her since she'd said they had to find a new Black Paladin. "Please, I don't want to go against you on this, but I can't lose anyone else out here. Blue and I are fast and we can handle the elements. I know we can do this. Please."

What would Shiro do? The answer came almost instantaneously. He'd go with Lance, maybe insist on taking the Black Lion for an added boost of speed. Reassure her that everything would be alright and she'd trust him to follow through, because he always did. And she could've let him go, because she would have been able to stay back and handle things with Dolan and Eos. But now there was no Shiro, no one to go or stay, or even offer the thoughtful advice she'd grown so accustomed to.

She swallowed hard and put a hand on Lance's shoulder. "Come back safe," she said. "And make sure your Lion's fully charged before you leave. I don't want to lose anyone else out here either."

Lance nodded. "I will, princess," he promised, and he left.

She steeled herself and went to the Bridge. This was Lance's mission to accomplishment—and she had her own problems to solve, as she found Hunk, Lira, and Coran waiting for her.

"Coran," she ordered. "Pull up a commmlink with King Eos. I have some questions to ask."

"This is taking forever," Ezor whined, and Acxa wanted to smack her upside the head. The pink and younger general was leaning back in her chair, her multicoloured phlaranx dangling from the end of her head. The screen in front of her was full of coordinates, and scanning as fast as it could, and although Acxa would never admit it—it was taking an awfully long time. By Prince Lotor's standards, anyway.
"Yeah," Zethrid agreed, burly and rising from her chair. "Why can't we just go punch Sendak out of hiding?"

"He's not in hiding," Acxa corrected. "He's in the Northern Fraction, near the solar system of 00-8, and should be moving to a main planet of—" She looked up from her chair in the centre of their ship's bridge—sleek in Galra purple with softer lighting and wide windows—as Narti turned her chair towards her.

Kova, furred and content, was curled around Narti's feet. "I think I found something," she signed. Acxa imagined that if Narti's face hadn't been a solid, shell-like plate, her eyes would've brightened.

"Excellent," Acxa said, corralling the other two to pay attention. "What is it?"

Narti expanded her holoscreen, which was blue and blinking. Acxa craned her neck when she felt her friend poke into her mind, not feeling like signing more complex information when there was an easier way. The 00-8 system seems to be a red-herring, considering the fact that while Sendak's last transmission to a Galra outpost indicated that was his intended location, I managed to find the ship number registered to him going in the opposite direction.

Ezor leaned over Narti's chair, smiling when Kova climbed onto her shoulder and nuzzled under her pink, bat-like ears. "Which is?"

Narti signed, distinct glee curling her mouth upwards. "Somewhere Zethrid gets to punch stuff."

:::

Eos dodged most of her questions, and Allura couldn't tell if it was insidious or if he really was that easygoing. Either way, he bought her story about the 'troublesome' members of her team, that two Galra had gone out on their own against everyone's orders. Allura could hear Lira holding back a thousand sharp words, but the girl was good at staying quiet. Better than Keith, anyway. She only spoke once the call was over.

"Has Lance left yet?"

"No," Allura said, turning to face her.

"Good. I'm going with him."

Hunk raised his brows, and Allura said, "Lira, I'm not sure that's—"

Lira checked her blaster strap and held her mask in one hand. "He shouldn't be going alone, and Commander Kolivan will blame me if anything goes wrong with Thace. I was assigned to protect him. I can't afford another strike against me."

Allura took the girl by the shoulders. "Even you cannot protect him from the elements, Lira. You have more use here, where you can work on finding the Red Lion's signal again."

Lira wrenched herself out of the princess' grasp, anger flaring up over her face. "I'll have a better chance getting the signal up if I can work from the Lion itself. And you cannot stop me. You can't want to do anything. You're not my Commander."

"No," Allura agreed, her voice tight, "but I thought I was your friend."

Lira looked towards the ground, her short white hair falling around her cheeks. "Thace and Keith are the only family I have left. I can't lose them too." She swallowed and looked up, her eyes fierce. "I'm
"Going."

Allura grit her teeth and sighed. "Very well—so long as Lance doesn't have a problem with it."

"Try and get the Red Lion's signal back on our radars when you find them," Pidge said, passing Lira a drive-key to help make it easier, and the girl flashed the paladin a smile on her way out.

She found Lance in the Blue Lion's hangar, pacing by his Lion's paws. "She's not done charging yet?" Lira asked, and he looked up. He looked surprised to see her, then somehow a little disappointed, before he smiled with a shrug of his lean shoulders.

"Just a few more ticks. Allura got in my head. I'm not just gonna pull a Keith and rush out there," Lance boasted, but his bravado fell away, as she knew it would. "No matter how much I may want to. What are you doing here?"

"I'm coming with you."

"Allura approved that?"

"Yes," said Lira, and then added, "Not without a fight, mind you. And provided you do not have a problem, but I did not think you would?"

"One condition," Lance said. "You gotta tell me what the Blades are planning on using the krun crystal for."

She frowned. "That's—"

"—classified, I know, but I wanna know, because I know you're hiding something, and Blue is my Lion and all. Take it or leave it."

Lira glared at him, and then remembered he couldn't see it behind her mask, which was all the more frustrating. She took it off. "Why do you have to grow a spine when it's the worst possible time for it?" she huffed, but stepped towards him. "The princess won't like it—but perhaps you'll have an appreciation for it, in some manner." She turned over her forearm and Lance saw tiny panels in her armour that slid open. She typed on them like a keyboard until a screen popped up, showing blueprints. "We're developing new sniper rifles, specifically primed for assassinations. Is that answer enough for you?"

"Why wouldn't Princess Allura like it?" said Lance slowly, taking in the guns. They were sleek with more power, and she was sure he could see Brizo's fingerprints all over in design.

"Covert assassinations doesn't seem like her style, now does it?" said Lira flatly. Allura wasn't opposed to going undercover or more guerrilla tactics, but Lira had a sneaking suspicion that going on missions specifically to take out high ranking Galra members wouldn't sit well with her. Especially with the next two targets the Blades had in mind.

"No it doesn't," said Lance, as the screen vanished and his eyes found Lira's. "But it also doesn't seem like she needs to know. For now, anyway."

Lira's lungs expanded. So it'd be a little longer before Kolivan chewed her out for sharing classified information. That was nice. (Maybe she shouldn't have been surprised. Lance was almost always nice.) It didn't change the fact he'd ended up backing her into a corner for nothing, though. "You're impossible," she grouched, and went to put her mask back on when he grabbed her arm.

"Blue will have an easier time recognizing you without it," he said. "And you look nicer without it."
"Blades aren't supposed to look nice," she said, but kept it off. She didn't want him to make it be another condition, for whatever reason.

"And now," Lance said, grinning as he released her arm; it was the first time he hadn't looked upset since they'd landed on Eidolon, "we can go."

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The Gladiator Ring didn't look very different than the last time Acxa had seen it. Granted, that'd been four hundred years ago, under different orders, and they'd been a group of five, not four, then. It'd been another six hundred years since they'd been knocked down a number, and Acxa still wasn't entirely sure how much they'd leaned into each other trying to fill the empty space. Enough that Lotor had kept them together, she supposed.

"I don't see Sendak here," Ezor said, as they stepped into the main stadium. The pit was empty, and so were the stands, a few generals and other sentries milling around with drinks.

"Sendak was captured by Voltron," said Acxa, "and their Champion. It spread through the rumour mill. He'll come here to re-establish his reputation, and his claim on the throne. Once he arrives, we can take him to Lotor. In the meantime, we can use the ship's prisoner database to do research on the weapon. See if anyone knows anything."

"How are we supposed to do that," Zethrid demanded, crossing her large arms over her chest, "when we can't tell anyone what the weapon is?"

"There are rebel Galra here," Acxa said. They never lasted long in prison, hated by other inmates for being Galra and hated by the guards for being traitors. "And scientists. We'll conduct interviews, and ask our questions carefully."

"We need to make sure to avoid the Druids here," Narti signed. "The Empress would ask too many questions if she knew of our inquiries."

"And if a prisoner does have valuable information?" Ezor asked.

Acxa's jaw tightened. "You know what our protocol is: leave no trail behind." She raised her hands and signed to Narti. "You're with me. Ezor, go with Zethrid. Make sure she keeps the punching to a minimum."

"Aw," the larger general pouted.

"We'll report back to Prince Lotor in a few hours," Acxa said. He'd be expecting a punctual update, and she couldn't let him down. There was too much riding on all this. The Empire, the throne, their lives. More than once, she wondered if he kept them around due to sentimentality, in his own way.

Kova curled around Narti's legs, dark eyes blinking, before Acxa picked him up and scratched under the cat's chin. She knew, beyond his long lifespan, that was why they'd kept Kova around. "You'll come with us too," she said, and looked up at her fellow generals. It was time to get to work.

"Meeting adjourned."

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Even in the Lion, it was freezing. Lance's chilled eyelids threatened to slide shut, and he felt Blue prod at his mind, snapping him awake. She was flooding her systems with as much heat as she could, but it wasn't doing much. It made him miss Olkarion, and the summer like days they'd spent there. Everything had made sense, the war had seemed manageable, and Shiro—Shiro had been—
"Hey, Lance."

Shiro smiled as the teen wheeled around to face him, in his usual Black Paladin Armour. It made Lance feel underdressed, and he stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. "Uh, hey. What's up?" He'd thought his leader would be in meetings with Allura all day. Maybe she'd shooed him off to give him a break. It's not like Shiro to listen to her about those things, too.

"I actually had a favour to ask you," Shiro admitted.

"Oh." Lance straightened up. "Whatever it is, I am up for the task—just say the word and—"

"It's not a mission," Shiro said. "I was actually hoping you help me with my shooting. I don't have a lot of experience with blasters, I usually fight in close combat, but I think it'd be good to broaden my horizon. You think you could give me some pointers?"

"Oh! Yeah, sure!" Lance beamed. Shiro, his hero, wanted his help with learning how to be a sharpshooter. It felt like a dream come true. "Right now?"

"Uh, yeah." Shiro smiled. "Whenever you're ready to head over to the training deck."

"I'll go put my paladin armour on right now," Lance said, and forced himself to walk until he went round the bend of the hallway, and broke into a run.

"Lance." Lira's hand was warm on his shoulder, and he snapped up straight.

"What?"

"Look." He followed her pointing finger as she leaned over his seat, and saw the grey dots on the white horizon. A streak of red lying by it. "I think that may be them, if they've taken shelter."

"Good find," Lance said. "Blue can lend a bit of her energy to Red. Hopefully get them both moving."

"I'll work on Red once we land," Lira said. "See if I can get her signal back online."

Lance glanced over at her. "You're really good with tech, aren't you?"

Lira gave him a small smile. "I'm a little more than passable, yes. But Blades have to be able to do a bit of everything. We never know what skills a mission will need. Tech was my primary training when I was first starting out."

"What have you focused on since then?" Lance asked, as he flew the Blue Lion closer to the caves.

Lira's smile faded as she looked back towards the caves in front of their caves. That was definitely Red, lying and half covered in the snow, but her yellow eyes were still lit up and she'd be able to open her mouth to let Lira in. Lance felt Blue pulse through him as she greeted her weakened sister, already lending energy, and his own chest grew tight. The Lions drew on their paladin's quintessence, so he'd have to get used to being more tired for the next few hours.

"Come on," said Lira, peeling away from his chair. "Let's go find Keith and Thace."

:::

Allura headed back to the ice castle with Pidge, and one hand ready to punch. Coran could hold down the castleship with Hunk, who had gifted her with his latest project, and while Allura couldn't shake the feeling she was heading into a trap, she knew she couldn't sit and wait and cower, and let
Eos or his son plot against her. She had to take the fight to them, and Pidge had gladly volunteered to come along, gripping their green bayard with a fierce anger. Allura supposed the cold hadn't helped the younger teen's mood.

It soon became quite clear that her hunch was right: Dolan and Eos were waiting for them in the throne room.

"Ah, Princess Allura," King Eos welcomed. "I was hoping you would return." His knights shifted towards the door, and the hair on the back of Allura's neck stood up, but she kept a pleasant smile plastered on her face anyway.

"Of course. We're hoping our paladins can retrieve our Galra allies and the crystals we need in one trip," she said. "We won't take up too much more of your hospitality. Thank you again for housing us."

"I am surprised you sent the Blue Paladin out after them," Eos admitted. "That puts you... three Lions down, doesn't it?"

Her blood chilled. She had never told him about the Black Lion being dormant. But maybe he had just heard the growing rumours, that the Black Lion hadn't been seen in active duty since Shiro had fallen, and extrapolated from there. "I'm afraid I don't understand," she said, nonplussed. "We still have three Lions fully operational."

Eos smiled, and she saw his sharper teeth. "I told you I had heard of your Black Paladin. That he was a skilled fighter. I am surprised you never asked me how I knew that."

"Shiro had a wide reaching reputation," Allura said, and caught Pidge's eye, knowing the Green Paladin understood. Be ready. For what, Allura didn't know, but something was about to happen.

But Eos shook his head. "No, I saw him fight. He was quite talented—tiny, though, compared to his opponent. I got a very good seat in the stadium. Had a friend who was a lieutenant, who insisted I come and watch. Said he was one of a kind. It's a pity I couldn't have met him, my friend was quite right."

Allura's stomach churned, and Pidge stepped up beside her. "You came to watch gladiator matches?" they hissed. "You're friends with the Galra, you're not neutral—"

"And the Galra are on their way here," said Dolan. He didn't look maniacally gleeful like his father, and he met Allura's burning eyes with an even look of his own. That was why he'd wanted them to get off the planet, why Eos had insisted on wasting their time. Time for the Galra to spend getting here. "Right now."

Allura held out her hand, and Hunk's constructed bayard formed a staff in her hand. The colours matched her battle suit. "And they are going to find you sorely empty handed," she growled. She hefted up her staff—and then swung around and knocked three knights in the head with it.

Pidge followed her lead, the knights’ torso’s too thick for the whip, but the paladin still managed to knock some down and clear a path towards the door. Eos was yelling for reinforcements, before Dolan clapped a hand over his father's mouth, and Allura turned around to face him.

"Get your crystals and go," he ordered. "We will do our best to hold off the Galra."

"We can't go anywhere without the rest of our team," said Pidge.

Allura gave him a thin smile. "So planet neutrality...?"
"Is my father's lie," Prince Dolan said. "There is no neutrality with the Galra. You are either against them, or complicit in their crimes. I tried being the latter. I could not live with the shame."

"Get your father subdued," she said. "We'll use the castleship as cover until our other teammates return." She caught his eye. "Thank you, Dolan, but perhaps do not slam me against a wall next time?"

He smiled, his teeth less sharp, but undeniably less threatening than his father. "My apologies, princess."

"I am getting real sick of corrupt kings," Pidge grumbled as they and Allura left the room.

Where were Keith and Lance when you needed them?

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"Uncle Thace!" Lira embraced him in a quick hug, only that he only stumbled slightly under the weight from. She quickly pulled away, examining him with a scrutinizing stare. "You're injured."

"Not badly," he said, massaging his ribs. "I lifted the krun crystal on my own and it was a bit too heavy." Indeed both the krun crystal for the Blades, and the iko crystal needed for the Black Lion, were lying by Thace's feet.

Keith raised his hands. "I tried to tell him," he said, and then squirmed when Lance slung an arm around his shoulders. "How are you freezing through our armour?"

Lance let him push him off. "How's your Lion?" Lance asked. "Blue's already getting in the groove with her now, but—?"

"She's weak," Keith affirmed. "The climate got to her and she held out just long enough to help us get a fire going."

"Ah," Lance looked at the fire, and then at the scorch marks behind it on the cave wall. "I was wondering how those got there." The cave opening was narrow, after all.

Keith crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey, Red did her best."

"And you," said Lira, rounding on him, "why didn't you help my uncle carry the crystals yourself?"

"Turns out the crystal mines down here aren't as free of possible dangerous creatures as Eos led us to believe," intervened Thace. "It was a struggle to get out with both and each other, but we managed it. They don't come up this close to the surface and we found some crystals earlier on in the tunnels when we doubled back around."

"I'll carry the krun crystal," Lira told him, "and we'll go over to the Red Lion together. I'll work on getting her commlink open again." She then walked over to the crystals, giving Keith's shoulder a quick squeeze because Lance knew she was glad to see him, despite it all, before she put her hands on her hips and looked at the crystal. "Seems easy enough," she said, and picked it up—and her knees buckled. "Dylak, that's heavy." But she waved Thace off when he offered help, and managed her way out of the cave with it as he followed.

"Is Allura pissed we got lost?" Keith asked, once the two Blades were gone.

"No," said Lance, plopping down next to him on the cave floor. "But she's not happy we had to stage a search and rescue mission..." He typed into his arm pad, and sighed. "And she won't be
happy Blue's signal is distorted right now either." Lance's brow furrowed. "Do you think something like that happened to Shiro's signal? Like his quintessence?"

Keith arched a skeptic eyebrow. "I don't think that's how a person's quintessence works, Lance."

"Then what do you think happened?

"I don't know. I just—" Lance sighed and drew the iko crystal into his lap. It was the size of a small dog, twice as heavy, and surprisingly warm to the touch, glowing faintly from within. "I'm glad we're gonna be able to wake up Black and get some answers." Keith sighed, and Lanced frowned at him. "What?"

"Nothing, just..." Keith looked away towards the fire. "I've been thinking about something Thace told me. What if we're supposed to let go?"

Lance folded his arm over the crystal. "What d'you mean?"

"What if we're not going to get the answers we want? What if Shiro really is... gone? We're gonna have to face that. I think Allura and Coran already have, and we haven't been making anything easier on her lately—"

"What? No," Lance retorted, setting the crystal aside as he stood up. "How could you say that?! What about not giving up on him, isn't that important to you? I thought we were gonna find a way to bring him home together—"

Keith glared at him, moving to his feet. "I'm saying we might have to be realistic! You think I want to lose the only real family I have left? But we're still a team and we're still at war, and Allura is right, we do have to start acting like it! We're going on missions like this one still and we have the Blades and we need the Lions—"

"So you want Allura to pilot Black so everything is easy-peasy? Better yet, we all forget about Shiro and stop trying to bring him home—"

Keith's eyes flashed. "Shiro is GONE! Nothing about this is easy, but we have to do something! I don't understand you! Why are you more set against this than I am?!"

"Because if Shiro couldn't make it then what hope do the rest of us have?!" Lance's chest heaved as he looked away, but he could feel Keith's shocked gaze on him, and a lump rose in his throat. "Shiro was the best of us," he managed, his voice thick, "and he couldn't make it, so what chance do the rest of us have of going home? I didn't sign up for a lifetime of war. I wanna believe I'll make it back to my family one day but if—if Shiro couldn't—if he's really gone, then—"

Keith's hand was a warm weight on his shoulder, and turned him back towards the fire. "You're going to get to go home, Lance," Keith said quietly. "You and Hunk and Pidge. I promise. Yeah, Shiro was the best of us, but he wasn't the last of us, and we—we still got a lot more to fight for, don't we? For him."

Lance sniffled and wiped at his eyes. "Y-yeah. We do." It felt easier to breathe than it had in weeks, and he stepped forward without shame and hugged the other boy, even if it took Keith a few seconds to get over the shock surely marking his face and hug him back. "Thanks, Keith."

Keith thumped him on the back with a gentle, if awkward, hand. "Yeah. No problem."

"Y-you really think we'll get back home?" Lance asked, as he drew away.
Keith kept a hand on his shoulder, a soft smile on his own face. "Yeah, I do. Someone has to give Shiro a proper monument."

Lance managed the tiniest shred of a genuine smile. "Yeah, I guess that's true." He startled when his commlink beeped loudly, and they pulled apart as he flicked it on. "Uh, hello?"

"Great, it worked!" crackled Lira's voice. "Red's back online, Keith."

"Guess that means it's time to hightail it back to the castleship," said Lance, and Keith hoisted the iko crystal into his arms. "Lira, Thace, you should stay in Blue with me for the ride back. It'll be warmer."

Lira laughed. "And leave poor Keith all alone?"

Keith grabbed Lance's commlink arm. "Hey!"

Lance wrenched his arm out of Keith's grasp. "You moving to Blue yet?"

"Red just let us out," said Lira, but there was panic in her voice now. "There's something you should see!"

They ran outside the cave and down the slippery, snowy slopes, and Lance's heart stopped: Galra cruisers, blaring and purple, were descending through the atmosphere. Blue had already gotten to her feet, her tail curled and laser shooting some of the smaller ships down, while Red still lay behind her in the snow. Lance shot a tether up his connection and Blue thrummed back in response, and he glanced at Keith as they ran towards their Lions.

"How's Red?" he asked.

"Not good," Keith replied. "She barely had enough energy to make the trip back, never mind a fight, and I think she's already been hit. Our best hope is getting her to the rest of the Lions so they can share quintessence together, but without Black I don't know if—look out!"

Keith shoved him forwards as a laser hit the peak of the cave's mountains, and snow careened down in an icy crash where they had been running only moments before. Lance spat out snow as he picked himself up from the ground, and saw the blasts were giving Blue more than enough to defend against, not only herself, but Red too. With Red temporarily out, they didn't have enough manpower to lift the Lion back home and have Blue defend against the Galra ships at the same time. And Lance knew he couldn't lift a Lion.

But there was one thing he could do.

"Blue!" he shouted, and the Lion's warmth flooded his veins for a moment; she was listening. "Get Red and the others out of here, I'll hold them off!"

There was a worried rumble at the same time Lira's voice broke over his commlink. "What? Lance, don't be stupid—"

Lance turned the commlink off. "You know what to do girl!" he yelled, and then turned around and sprinted back towards the cave. If he got trapped in there even this wouldn't work, but Blue would have his back until he could defend it himself. He trusted his Lion. He ran past the dying fire and down wet cave corridors, never letting up despite the stitch in his side and the way his breath fogged his helmet visor.

After a few minutes, he came across walls glittering with crystallized light, and wrenched the
nearest krun crystal from the wall. If he knew Lira, then—the crystal hit the floor with a thud and a piece broke off. He willed his bayard to be his blaster and then willed the panels open. It didn't look too different than the one Hunk had built, with less wires and more vaguely glowy power sources—crystals past?—and he jammed the krun crystal in wherever it would fit as he ran back towards the cave entrance.

Blue was still holding her own in the snow, but she was struggling, as Red slowly got to her feet, her yellow eyes dull. As soon as Lance’s feet touched the disturbed snow, Blue roared and picked Red up by the neck with her feet. It was difficult, as Red was only a smidgen smaller, but they got liftoff, and Lance readied his gun as the Galra ships swivelled towards his Lion.

*Please, let this get their attention.*

Lance pulled the trigger... and blasted a hole straight through the nearest fighter, taking off its left wing. He let out a whoop of joy and readied his gun again, firing rapidly and blindly. The ships were so large it didn't matter where he hit them, as long as he hit them—and boy, was he.

"What about a moving target?" Shiro had asked, and Lance had smiled.

"A moving target is almost easier," he'd said, confidently adjusting Shiro's arm angle towards the bulls-eye target, a pacing Altean bot. "You don't aim for the target itself. You aim for where it's going."

He angled his gun towards the left and hit one of the cruisers in their main port engine. Angled it right and hit the other, and now it was going down, and the other ships turned away from his fleeing Lion... and towards him. Was it possible for inanimate ships to look severely pissed? And now they were firing at him.

Lance let out a streak of swears under his breath as he grabbed his blaster and started running. Where, exactly, he wasn't sure, but he direction his Lion had headed and disappeared into couldn't help. Blue would make it back in minutes and then come back for him. He just had to make it until then. His commlink connection would be down now that she was gone, but at least Lira and Keith and Thace could warn Allura and the rest of the team that the Galra were here. Had Eos or another one of the Eidolons betrayed them? He had never liked the look of that grouchy prince—

He dodged another shower of blaster fire, and was thinking that he could actually pull this off, when he heard the ice crack beneath his feet. Oh, the universe hated him. Had this planet really been in its summer, warm weather this whole time and they just hadn't known? Either way, his escape route couldn't take much gunfire before it would break completely, and he knew it'd be over if he went in the water. Forget about surviving the Galra. He'd have to, first, somehow, survive the freezing cold waters, and then second, manage to drag himself out of the water. And then survive the aftermath. Was it too late (or too early) to ask Blue to come back?

He just had to keep going.

"You seriously never fought with a blaster in the arena?" Shiro shook his head, and Lance tried not to gape. "So you took down all those big gladiators down by yourself? How'd you do it?"

Any slight smile on Shiro's face faded, and Lance started to feel bad when his leader responded, very quietly, "The only thing that matters in the arena—in any fight—is that you keep going. You just have to keep going."

So when he heard the ice continue to crack, Lance kept going—until he looked down and saw he wasn't running on ice, anymore. His eyes widened, his brain barely believing it, but hey, he was in
space and soul bonded to a giant magical Lion warship. Hadn't stranger things happened? But the
sight of himself, standing on water as though it was land, beyond the disbelief, made years of Sunday
masses come rushing back. Jesus Christ.

"I'm walking on water," he thought aloud, and then it sunk in. "I'm walking on water!" His
miraculous new power didn't stop the gunfire, however, and he leapt up to avoid a blast. "I'm gonna
die walking on water!"

So he took off running, again, until he stumbled back onto ice and thought his lungs might give out,
until there was a rush of warmth and his Lion was looming over him. Blue shot cover fire and then
lowered her head and opened her maw, and Lance hauled himself inside. He managed to make his
way to his pilot seat, and looked at the symbol on his bayard, Guardian spirit of water, and laughed
to himself.

"You really came through, didn't you beautiful?" he said, patting her dashboard, and then
remembered the way Shiro had corrected his piloting grip, all those months ago. He reared his Lion
into control as he felt her energy entwine with the others, even Black's, although faint. Tears stung at
his eyes and he smiled. "Thank you, Shiro."

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"Keith and Lance are in the fight," Coran reported, and Allura only caught a glimpse of the Lions as
they soared past the windows of the Black Lion's hangar, joining Pidge and Hunk in the air, tossing
Galra battleships like chew toys between the jaws of their Lions. She knew Lira and Thace were on
the bridge with him, Thace holding the Blades' precious *krun* crystal.

And now she was holding the *iko* crystal up to the Black Lion, and neither was glowing. Allura
gritted her teeth in frustration. "I know I'm not a paladin," she began, "or a pilot, but Black, you need
to wake up. I know you miss Shiro." Her voice caught. "I miss him too. I miss him so much. But we
have to keep going. We have to protect what we have left. Please, I brought you the crystal. I've
done my best to cleanse you. Why won't you wake? Is it because the team is divided on what to do in
regards to you?"

She bit her lip and pressed her forehead against the Lion's lower jaw, ignoring the coldness of the
metal. "I know I'm not who Shiro wanted as his successor. I know I'm not who Lance wants. I know
what everyone else thinks—I know that I'm failing. I know I'm not him. I'll never lead them like him.
I don't need to be your pilot or paladin. I don't want to replace him. Fly yourself, if you must. Use my
quintessence. I'll give you as much as you need. Just let me help them. Keep them stable, keep them
safe as I can. I'm *trying*. I'm trying the best I can, I just—I can't do this alone, but he's gone—"

She cradled the crystal over her chest. "And I loved him, too. I miss him so much. Please, Black.
Ebony. Let me help you. Let us help each other, and honour his memory. If you want me to be your
pilot, your paladin, I—" she swallowed hard. This would be more responsibility, more space to see
where Shiro should have fit. Did she want this? No. But perhaps she needed it. What were her
parents, if not humble rulers? What was Shiro, if not a humble leader?

She dropped to her knees. "Please. Let me serve you." She placed her free hand on the Lion's jaw. She
couldn't do this on her own. She had trusted the Black Lion's judgement in trusting Shiro, in
trusting his. How was it fair for her to withhold her trust now, just because it was more difficult than
it had ever been before? Allura slowly exhaled. "I will do whatever you ask of me. I trust you."

Light bore down on her closed eyelids, and she looked down at the crystal in her arms when she
opened them. Nothing had changed. Then what...? Allura looked up and found a flicker of her
reflection in the Lion's lukewarm metal. The crystal in her mother's circlet was glowing clear and
bright.

The Lion was summoning her, as the metal beast grew warmer under her hands. As she felt the tug of quintessence in her chest.

Allura's hands shook. She didn't want to be a Paladin. She didn't want to sit in the place Shiro had died. What right did she have, to come home from that cockpit safe and sound when he didn't? When her family had borne Voltron from a sin longer than the war ravaging the galaxy that her father had let go unchecked?

She didn't move from her knees. "Black..." she croaked, and then felt the Lion prod into her mind. Memories rushed in, warm and coaxing. Shiro's smile. It drove a stake of strength into her heart, as she felt the Lion's consciousness brush hers. It wasn't words, exactly—it wasn't anything like she had expected a Lion-Paladin bond to feel like, as every time she had asked either of her parents they hadn't quite been able to describe, but the message being communicated was clear: paladins do now bow to their Lions.

And she had been chosen.

Had Shiro felt this same sense of unworthiness, the day they had met and Black had opened up to him?

The Lion's metal jaw creaked open, her eyes gleaming yellow. Allura got to her feet, and felt Black brush closer over her mind. More warmth, the first time she'd felt warm since he hadn't come back. You are not unworthy. You have not failed. Her eyes burned with tears as she stepped into the Lion, and made her way to the cockpit. Her hands were still shaking, her heart unsteady in her throat.

The pilot's chair loomed like an unclimbable mountain, and Allura nearly turned back. It was only the feeling of Black, anchored in her chest, that made her keep going. The Lion wanted this as much as she did; she could feel it, in the slight tremors that poked at her mind. Losing Shiro had been a deep wound to both of them that would never completely heal. But maybe, it could scar.

She slowly made her way around, staring out the cockpit. Where was the courage she needed to sit down now that she needed it the most? Her heart was beating hard and fast, aching. Hollow.

Tears dripped down her cheeks. "He was our heart," Allura said. He certainly had been hers. "How am I supposed to—"

Black nudged at her mind. A heartbeat is made up of two beats, the Lion seemed to say. Not one.

Allura sat down, and gripped the controls. She took a steadying breath. She wasn't supposed to replace him. She was supposed to finish them, as the words left her lips.

"And I am the second."

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"—we can't do this with just four Lions," Hunk yelled over the commlink. Most of the Galra ships had been destroyed at this point, but that didn't mean it wasn't still a challenge. He didn't even necessarily need Voltron. Just a fifth Lion to help tip the scales just a bit more in their favour, with Red and Green slowed down due to the cold.

"You don't have to," came another voice, and Hunk watched the Lions all swerve and roar as Black flew towards them.
Hunk's whole being lit up, Yellow happier than she'd been in months. "Allura!"

The Black Lion picked up one of the fighters in its jaw and tossed it into one of the cruisers; the latter went down in a fiery explosion. "Come on!" the princess called. "Let's get the Galra out of here!"

And it was with a starting whoop from Lance that they did just that.

:::

"I am sorry again, about my father," said the newly crowned King Dolan, once they were all gathered in the throne room. "And the Galra."

Ragged, Allura managed a smile. "That is alright. I am just glad my team and I are all alright, and so long as we can count you as part of the Voltron Alliance, all is forgiven."

The crown didn't fit his head quite right yet (it would have to be tailored) but Dolan would make a good, humble king when they shook hands. "You have my word." His father, meanwhile, would be spending the rest of most of his life in the castle dungeons.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I think my team and I should really be getting on the road," Allura said. The paladins and Thace and Lira were lined up behind her. She knew Coran was preparing the Castleship for takeoff and warmer temperatures as they spoke.

"Of course."

Dolan let her go, and Allura finally let exhaustion sag her shoulders once they reached the Castleship. She'd always known the Black Lion, as the leader of the pride, required the most quintessence from its pilot, but as a somewhat trained Altean alchemist, and she was this tired... how had Shiro always managed it without complaint? Coran greeted her on the bridge with a cheery grin, and she was beyond grateful when he clasped his hands together and she knew he would handle the next few hours.

"Alright, team. Let's eat and then get some rest. We'll be heading back to Olkarion with the crystals and the good news. We've all earned a bit of a break." He placed a hand on her shoulder, and she saw the pride shining in his eyes. Her still battered heart swelled. "You especially, Princess."

"Wait," said Lance, shifting his weight, and Allura looked back at him, hoping this wouldn't be an argument. From any of her paladins. "I want to apologize. I was being a jerk earlier and that wasn't fair to you. I know that now." He gave her a small smile. "Of course you're not going to replace Shiro. You're going to honour him. The same the rest of us are, by being the best paladins we can be. The paladins and leaders he believed we could be. Which is why," he slung an arm over Hunk's shoulders, who also grinned, "we're gonna get your armour and bayard all ready for you, for our next mission."

"And Pidge and I will cook dinner," Keith offered. "You rest." He smiled. "We'll wake you when it's ready."

Pidge put a hand on her shoulder. "Yeah. You're not in this alone, princess. You're our commander, and our friend, and we'll follow you anywhere. As long as it takes to end this war."

Allura cried, and smiled. She looked around at her team. One paladin down, but with no less heart. Maybe they could do this, after all. She cleared her throat. "For Shiro."

Her team looked back at her, Coran's mustache twitching. "For Shiro."
Pockets of Time and Space

Chapter Summary

Various Galra groups inch closer towards their goals. A renewed Team Voltron examines new abilities.

Chapter Notes

more of a transitionary/backstory/exposition chapter than anything else, but we're getting to the drama soon and I hope you all enjoy it anyway!

ARC V: Honour

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Pockets of Time and Space

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Hi, Coran.

The bridge was crowded, as he lingered near the back and walked the conference call continue, only really listening with one ear. The paladins stood silent and occasionally interjected while Allura handled the majority of the conversation with Queen Ryner, and Commander Kolivan, and rest of the Voltron Alliance. Baujal of Taujeer had slinked his way back in once he'd seen the Black Lion's eyes glow in a holoscreen, but Coran hadn't quite forgiven him for pulling out in the first place. The newly crowned King Dolan was there as well, even as servants scurried in the background of his feed, to get his kingdom back in order.

"We'll be arriving in Olkarion in a few vargas," Allura said, nodding more so towards Queen Ryner. "We must transport the krun crystal to the proper drop off point with Lira and Thace first, but the Castle must finish recharging before we can make the wormhole."

That, and Coran knew Allura was exhausted; sharing her quintessence from a drained Lion, and the experience of being Bonded at all, with everything she had been going through lately... He'd almost insisted on sending her to bed straight away, if he'd thought she would listen and not expend more energy arguing with him.

If you're hearing this, then you already know what happened. I'm sorry. You've already lost so much. I didn't want you to lose another friend. But that's war, I guess. Depending on when you're listening to this, I don't have any advice—or at least, not any that you'd need. Just trim your mustache, and take care of yourself, and the team. Lance and Pidge rely on you, and you even got Keith to open up once you two made up, and Hunk can always use some help in the kitchen.

A sigh escaped him as Coran shut his eyes. He was tired, too. He'd listened to Shiro's message so many times he had the man's own quiet, breaking sigh memorized. It was the reason Coran was able to haul himself out of bed most mornings and plaster on a cheery smile no matter how placid, to try
and make sure everyone was fed and sleeping at least a little. And with the paladins now going back into battles, and searching for whatever was left of Shiro on the side, he knew things would only get harder. Better, maybe, but not any easier.

I wish I knew what to say to you. I'm sure once I've finished recording this I'll think of a million other things I should have said, but... Thank you, for looking after us. It's been a long time since someone's looked after me, but I know you always tried. You're the closest thing I've ever had to a father. And thank you, for looking after Allura. She means the world to me and just... Just take care of her, for me, okay? Don't let her lose her spark. It kept me going more than she knows.

Coran's face tightened, his brow pinching, before he opened his eyes and turned to face the paladins. He forced a smile. "Now, is it finally time for dinner? We can't let fresh goo go to waste, y'know."

I love you, Coran, and I'll miss you. If there is something on the other side of all this, I'll say hi to Alfor for you. I promise.

....

The cells of the gladiator ring were dark and shallow, and both generals towered over the prisoner slumped over in the corner. "The weapon," Ezor said, sneering. "What do you know?" Zethrid cracked her knuckles behind her, placing her thick fist against one purple palm.

The rebel Galra had crescent markings under their eyes, and under their chin. A Yurak with furry ears. "I know nothing of the weapon you speak," they said, thickly accented. From a faraway colony, too, maybe close to the Outer Rim. Who knew how far the Blade of Marmora's members came from?

"We checked your records," Zethrid growled with a grin. She and Ezor had the evidence on their side, as she shoved the holographic file in the rebel's face that Ezor had procured. "You were on a Blade base near these coordinates. You must've seen something funny."

"I do not have much of a sense of humour."


"We're high up officials. I bet we could improve your living conditions here."

The rebel turned away with a scowl. "I'd rather die quickly," they said, and Ezor pouted. "May Merla's curse be upon your heads."

Zethrid seized them and lifted them up by the throat. "What do you know about the Princess?"

"She was a terrible witch," the rebel wheezed, gleeful at having struck some kind of nerve.

"Deathless. There are rumours she walks among us still, a phantom, a sin. Her curse is the haunting."

Zethrid let the rebel drop, and turned sharply towards Ezor. "This was a waste of time," she growled, ears flattened closer to her head. "Let's go. We have our rendezvous soon anyway."

Neither General as they left heard the rebel hoist themselves up, and raise their right wrist to their mouth. They shook back the sleeve of their prisoner uniform, to the chip buried under their shallow skin. If these were the Generals they thought so, then the quartet and Galra prince had played their own hand unintentionally.

"Marta's prisoner log, to Commander Kolivan: Lotor's Generals are here," the Blade wheezed. The
big general's hand had nearly crushed their throat. "Your orders were correct. Lotor wants to take Sendak out himself. The rest of a mission is a go. The generals also spoke of a weapon, and know of our outpost in the Tylax Quadrant. They are looking." Marta cleared their throat. "They are coming."

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The next morning, Lance bolted up in bed and could barely contain his excitement. With everything going on the previous day, he had forgotten about it, and then when falling asleep, he was sure he had dreamed it, but no. He had really walked—run—could run on water. His abuelita had always said he was a gift from God, but he had never thought it would suddenly be so literal! And after everything that had happened, and him being a bit of a jerk to Allura, maybe this was exactly the cool, good news they all needed. The princess would be happy, wouldn't she? His abilities were clearly coming from his Lion. Unless his body had just done something weird and funky with the gravity on Eidolon, but he didn't think so. The thrum of Blue in his veins felt stronger now. And the slight leak he'd plugged up for a moment, in the Yellow Lion's hangar, that made more sense now too.

And he was the first to have this new ability. He had come first in something and beaten everyone else. Although... if Shiro had been here, Lance was sure he wouldn't have been first. That would have been Shiro. But Lance had never minded coming second to his former leader, and he still would have beaten Keith, and Shiro would have been proud of him. Lance's eyes stung as he pulled on his jacket. Shiro would have been proud.

He really was gone, wasn't he?

Lance wiped his eyes as he stepped out into the hall, determined not to let anything take away his joy. They had a new Black Paladin, and there was no better fit for it than Allura. They'd gotten out of Eidolon alive and helped Dolan take the throne, the Voltron Alliance was back in action, and they'd be able to form Voltron again. And as an added bonus, they'd be going back to Olkarion to discuss some new plans with the Blades—he'd missed the warmer, sunny planet after all that snow—but until then, Thace and Lira would be on the Castleship with them. It was always fun having Lira around, and Thace made Keith slightly less grumpy too.

He found the team eating breakfast in the lounge room, plates beset with what looked like toast smeared with space goo, and walked in with a spring in his step. "I have some exciting news!" he said.

Hunk rested his chin in his hand. "Ooh, do tell."

Lance shot him an appreciative grin. "Well, you're never gonna believe this!" He bounced on the heels of his feet for a moment, before he blurted, "I can walk on water!"

Allura dropped her spoon. "P-pardon me?"

"It was incredible," Lance gushed. "I was walking on the ice, and then running—and then I was on water. I can walk on water! How cool is that? Allura, did you know I could do that?"

"Yes, but—" Her face brightened amid her shock. "I wasn't sure, as you aren't Altean, if your bonds with your Lions would develop to the point where your elemental powers would begin to come in. They were designed with Alteans in mind, after all."

"They did accept and bond with Galran paladins," Coran pointed out, smiling at Keith. "Zindi of Zadai was quite proficient with growing things in her spare time. She even trained with the Olkari."
"Ooh!" Pidge lit up like their datapad. "Can I do that too? I mean, growing stuff with technology was pretty cool—"

"Hey," Lance pouted, and pointed to himself. "Only paladin with actual powers, here."

Allura sobered and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Yes, of course. My apologies, Lance. Once we reach Olkarion, I can see what I can find in the sacred texts and prepare a proper lesson. You can practice and the others can prepare, now that we know this facet of your bond is possible." She gave him an easy smile. "It shouldn't be long before your Lions tell you their names, now, either."

Keith's jaw dropped. "Our Lions have names?"

"Yes?" She looked at him, puzzled. "Revealed to paladins in time. It is a sign of deeper trust, of each paladin being accepted wholly into their pride."

Lance turned to Pidge with a deadly serious look on his face. "I'll bet you ten credits I can learn my Lion's name before Keith learns his!"

Pidge grinned and stuck out their hand. "Deal. You may have been bonded to Blue a bit longer, but Red totally thinks of Keith as her kitten, always rescuing him and stuff."

"As a good team should," said Coran, smoothing out his mustache.

"Speaking of teams," said Allura, turning to Thace and Lira—the older Galra seemed to have been watching everything with vague amusement. "You should likely tell me where your drop off point for the _krun_ crystal is, before the rest of us head to Olkarion."

"Of course, princess," said Thace, rising. "If we could move to the Bridge? It will be much easier to show you there."

Allura raised her eyebrows, but allowed him to lead the way to the bridge and type into a holopad. Hunk grabbed Lance a piece of goo toast and the Blue Paladin munched on it on the way over. Allura didn't have the energy to scold him for chewing with his mouth open, even if Pidge made a gagging noise that coaxed a smile out of Keith. She was just glad for now they were all being generally patient and silent, knowing answers about their Lions and powers would come later, but soon.

She watched as a hologram whizzed to life in the middle of the bridge, slowly just with blue lines in the outline of a vague shape, or ship, before Thace pressed a few more keys and the whole thing filled in properly: the looming insignia of the Blade of Marmora, highlighted as a new space station.

"We're going right to your new HQ?" Allura said, puzzled.

"One of them," Lira said, finally breaking her silence. "We're hoping to have three primary bases, to avoid the collapse of one being as detrimental as it was last time." Keith shifted uncomfortably, but no one else paid him any mind; they had let it go long ago. "This is Base Delta. Uncle Thace is still working on its cloaking technology, to seal it in a pocket of time and space."

"Ulaz was the mastermind behind them," said Thace. "Once his sniper days were over, he set to work on new technology. He could install one in any base. Now, we're trying to piece together and update his code. We're hoping Brizo and the Olkari, and perhaps even the Green and Yellow paladins could help with that."

"Yeah!" Hunk stooped down and slung an arm around Pidge's shoulders. "It sounds fun. Like making a space sandwich, right?"
"One that can devour you instead if you open up the wrong dimensional pocket?" said Keith, and both Thace and Lira nodded. "Yeah, it sounds like a real fun time."

"Hm," said Pidge, grinning. "Maybe you should Keith-proof it then."

"Yeah," Lance played along. "Put up a sign: no mullets allowed."

"Hey!" Keith protested, pouting.

"I'll need the coordinates for Base Delta to wormhole there," Allura said, as the boys started bickering and Pidge snickered. "We could arrive there in another few ticks, if you wish to do so now."

Lira didn't smile, but Thace did. "To Base Delta it is."

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"Sire."

Lotor smoothed down his robes and hair. "What news do you have for me, Acxa?" He'd drawn up a holofeed for his, as he sat in the throne like chair in his room. The doors and windows of the Dark Tower were still shut, although the week of mourning was nearly over, and he could leave Zadai behind, soon. Hopefully with Sendak's severed head in tow.

His general shifted, clearly uncomfortable. Good. "We weren't able to find much news about the weapon," she said. "But Sendak should be arriving in two days time. We will confront him then."

"Hm." Why his father's favourite General had put so much investment in the gladiator fights, Lotor had never understood. But his mother had gifted Sendak with a new arm, providing he hadn't lost it to the princess of Altea's little fighters. "And you know what you and the Generals must do?"

"Take him out," said Acxa, her face hard.

Lotor nodded. "I expect you to handle it well. I will be attending to my own matters in the meantime, and will be off-planet on a trip to Pollux."

Acxa's eyebrows rose, one becoming hidden behind the wave of her hair that fell over one side of her face. "You require something from the druids, sire?"

"Nothing that is of your concern," he said, and she ducked her head. "But if you must know, it is of something about my dear sweet sister."

Acxa's head snapped up. "Has there been any leads on her, sire?"

His lips twitched. "You and your Generals are still eager for bloodlust, I see."

"Of course, sire." Acxa placed her fist over her heart in salute. "She cost us much."

"And you are all still taking your doses regularly?"

"Yes, sire."

"Good. That will be all, Acxa. I will summon you four once my business is finished, and I expect to hear of your successes."

"Yes, sire," Acxa repeated. "We will be ready. We won't fail you."
Lotor's eyes glittered. "I know."

:::

The team waved goodbye to Thace and Lira, Kolivan waiting at Base Delta with some Blades to fully transport the *krun* crystal from the docking bay. "Eidolon went smoothly?" he said, unsmiling.

"In the grand scheme of things," said Keith dryly. They made eye contact for a second before Keith turned away, and Allura didn't let the silence dwell.

"We'll see you soon at Olkarion?" Allura checked, and Kolivan nodded. It was strange to see him without Antok by his side, but she supposed his second in command was overseeing another one of the bases being constructed.

"Antok will arrive first in my stead," Kolivan said. "But I'll stop by. We need to finalize some plans with Brizo, and make sure they're not too distracted by that space whale of theirs."

"Queen Ryner says they've both been thriving," Allura said. "The paladins and I have some business to take care of once we reach Olkarion, but I can check up on our scientist."

Kolivan shifted. "And you'll be training as your team's new Black Paladin?"

She stiffened, but managed a smile. "Yes, Commander."

"Good," he said, his own smile curt but as warm as he could get. "You're a fine leader in your own right, Princess."

"Thank you, Commander. I should be taking my leave now."

"I look forward to having Voltron back in the fight," he said, and they briefly shook hands before Allura led her team back to the Castleship, and she opened up a wormhole to Olkarion.

She felt Black feed her quintessence through her connection, but she was still drained once they came out on the other side. How Shiro had bonded so quickly with Black, and so well, after a year of starvation and imprisonment was beyond her; yet another thing she would never be able to thank and praise him properly for, now that he was gone.

Ryner greeted them when they touched down upon Olkarion, and gave her a report on Brizo's status that meant she didn't have to check on the many limbed scientist herself. "Briz is doing well and nearly finished constructing better engines for the Blades' ships. Spawella is twice as big and got a new tank, and they're both very happy with it."

"Good," Allura said, relieved. Briz was always a bit of a mixed bag, and if anything happened to that space whale, she wasn't sure Briz's remaining sanity could take it. At least here on Olkarion they were all safe. "I have some training to do with my team in the Castle of Lions, so we'll be staying there for the new few weeks instead of in our usual quarters here."

"Of course." Ryner gave her a small smile. "Good luck, princess. I know you'll bear the mantle of Black Paladin well."

Allura inclined her head and tried to ignore the tightness in her chest. She leaned into her connection with Black, letting the Lion feed warmth and comfort back to her. They were both still mourning, but they could rebuild, together, and honour the man they had both loved. "I will certainly do my best," she agreed.
After all, the mission was more important than any one individual. Even those who were completely irreplacable.

Allura took a deep breath and shepherded the paladins back to the Castleship. "Now, get ready in your armour on the training deck," she instructed. "Coran and I will be there in a few ticks with the information you need. It's time for you to learn about the elements."

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Here's his chance. Thace moves before he can loose his nerve, seizes Ulaz Astero by the wrist, and yanks him into the nearest storage closet. The hallway of their academy seems empty enough they haven't been noticed, but Thace knows they're not out of the woods yet. Kolivan will have his head if he's misjudged things and this goes poorly.

"Have you ever heard," says Thace, "of the Blade of Marmora?"

Ulaz's pale features stare back at him in shock. "I do not understand—"

"I have seen you spar and fight and shoot against your peers. I know what you're capable of."

Ulaz shakes, even as Thace can see understanding slowly settle over him; this is just denial. "Maala, if this is some strange attempt at courting—"

Thace blushes despite himself, but does his best to ignore it. Clearly his staring hadn't been as inconspicuous as he'd hoped. "No, I—my brother did not die, the way we were all led to believe. Him and I are Blades, and I believe that you could be too. Have you never wanted something more to fight for than what the Empire has given you?"

His peer's yellow eyes flicker. "I am but a Kyrak. I am not allowed more."

"The Blades do not care about castes," says Thace. "And neither do I."

Ulaz's face grows pained. "I have a sister. I cannot just leave her."

"You would not have to. My brother was unable to fake his death before my sister and I discovered his plot. You could tell her the truth, before you disappear. Perhaps even check in on her when it's safe."

Ulaz's yellow eyes duck down. "And if I took you upon your offer," he says, "if I joined the Blades." His eyes harden, and Thace knows he's been successfully snared. "What would I be?"

Thace grins. "Whatever you wanted to be. An assassin, perhaps."

Thace heard the sound of a rifle firing before he entered the brand new training deck on Base Delta. He found Lira with a sniper rifle notched on her shoulder. She hit the bullseye six times in quick succession. He watched her shoulders tighten and then relax when she heard his footfalls, and she lowered her gun as she turned towards him.

"You shoot like him," said Thace.

Lira didn't smile the way he'd hoped. "I do not know if I am ready for this," she said, tracing the spine of her rifle. "I have never carried out this sort of mission alone. Uncle always used to make sure I had my aim straight."

"I have felt that way too," Thace said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Many times I felt out of my
depth in constructing our new Base or on missions. More still in consulting with Voltron's scientist for our new guns. But I have managed, and so will you. You have always had a strong hold over your duty, Lira."

Her eyes darted down to the floor, and then up to his face. "You mean the way you did at the Emperor's central command?"

Thace stiffened. "I don't know what you—"

"I know they were tipped off there was a spy because you were looking for Orilla in their databases." She put a hand on her hip. "Care to enlighten me?"

"I couldn't not check," Thace muttered, and she softened.

"You didn't find anything, did you?"

He shook his head. "Their records drop off at the same times ours do. It's like... it's like she just turned into smoke." Kolivan would have called him a fool, for keeping the search going after twenty years, but he knew his older brother didn't think their sister was dead, either.

"She may have met Uncle's fate," Lira said. "No body to bury. Just... swallowed by the stars."

Thace gave her a hard stare. "I'm not so certain we know Ulaz's fate, either," he revealed, and her eyes widened.

"What do you mean? The paladins were there. They saw his base collapse and explode—"

"Into a pocket of time and space, yes."

Lira placed a hand on her chest. "Thace, I would like my Uncle to be alive just as much as you, but —"

"Ulaz gave their Black Paladin a message for me. The Champion recorded it before he died." Thace procured the chip recording with his name inscribed on it in characters he didn't recognize from one of the pockets located beneath his Blade breastplate. "Ulaz's request was for me to be told he was sorry."

Lira faltered. "Those sound like last words to me," she said softly, and Thace made a note to ask how she felt about not being included in that request later.

"Your uncle and I had a vow to never say goodbye when we left on separate missions." "Because Blades don't say goodbye," she said, as though the reason was obvious—and indeed, Blades did not say goodbye. No attachments; no funerals. It was better to have clean cut offs, and to not tempt fate.

"We did not say it because we knew we would see each other again," Thace continued, pressing. "We would say 'I'm sorry,' instead. Sorry that we had to part, and bear the pain of that separation. Not that we would never reunite."

Her face fell. "Perhaps he meant you would see one another again in Kral-El?" Even Galra liked the idea of a harmonious afterlife, after all.

"If he thought he was dying, he would have said goodbye," Thace said firmly. "No. There's something else going on, something else he knew. I just have to figure it out."
Lira pursed her lips and then she very lightly poked him in the ribs. "I suppose it is a good thing you have time to sit at a computer and recover, then," she said, trying to smile.

Thace managed one far better than she did. "I'll be here to see you off and see you when you get back from your mission. You still have a few days. Just breathe. You'll do well."

Lira watched him walk away and wondered if he knew that was part of the problem.

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"Each Lion, as you may have noticed," Allura began, "is linked with a corresponding element, and so therefore is their paladin. The Green Paladin is the Guardian of the forest, and living things. The Red Paladin is the Guardian of fire. The Blue Paladin is the Guardian of water. The Yellow Paladin is the Guardian of the earth. And the Black Paladin—" She glanced towards where Shiro would have sat in the centre of the group, gathered today on the floor of the training deck. "Is the Guardian of the sky. Attachment and ability to these powers varied from paladin to paladin across the generations. Just because Lance has access to them does not mean the rest of you will, or in such short a time span, and—yes, Hunk?"

He kept his hand raised. "But uh, if each Lion's quintessence is supposed to mirror their pilot's, then why doesn't my Lion—or any of ours—have an equally strong bond with each of their different paladins, over the years?"

"The Lions seek those with complimentary paladins," she answered. "Not only for themselves, but for each other and the other paladins. All parts of the pride must work together to form a coherent whole that is capable of forming Voltron." She smiled slightly at Lance. "Historically, Blue is often the one to gauge the other paladins the other Lions are considering. The Lion is flexible enough to see how each possible paladin's weaknesses and strengths can work with her sisters', and one another. But there are some paladins, like Shiro, and Lance now, where the connection runs deeper than personality and a common goal. Coran?"

Her advisor drew up a holofeed. There was a diagram of a Lion, transparent and generic enough to apply to any of the five, but based the most off Black's shape. Beside it were the Altean characters for SOUL BOND.

"There are some paladins' whose quintessence and personality don't just match their Lion, but their soul as well. These paladins do not exist in every generation, but they are the strongest. When a Lion's and paladin's soul matches up, it is known as a Soul Bond. It creates a heightened connection, and these are typically the connections that cause elemental powers to develop in paladins even when they are far away from their Lions, even after say years apart."

"So Blue is my other half, basically?" said Lance, looking rather delighted, if a tad unsure of what to think about the fact a giant mechanical Lion was his soulmate.

Allura gave him a soft, reassuring smile. "More than that. The Lion helps make you whole, and vice versa. The powers cannot be rushed however. They come out in time, and in natural situations. The fact that you," she said, glancing at Pidge and Keith, "were affected by Eidolon's cold climate is hopeful, however, that your powers will develop. And Hunk, I'm sure they will for you as well. The Yellow Lion will not forget your devotion to a rock planet like the Balmera. But for now, Lance, since you're the only paladin will access to these abilities, you will train with Coran in the evening to figure out how they work and how they work for you. We also have a series of ancient texts for you to refer to for training tips."

"As your bonds with your Lions deepen," she continued, and Coran drew up a different holograph
that read LION NAMES. "In time, your Lions may reveal their names to you. Each Lion has one predominant one, sometimes gifted by their first paladin, sometimes it is an intrinsic thing they have known since they were created. Their names are meant to be kept between a Lion and their paladin, and the wider pack as a whole. It is a treasured secret, and one that has never been written down. The Lion sharing theirs with you is a sign of deep trust and love, and typically happens with every Lion-paladin pair. You will come to know them in time."

"So basically," said Pidge, not bothering to raise your hand, "you called this lesson to tell us we just have to be patient?"

Allura frowned. "More than that. I told Queen Ryner we would be hard at work training the next few weeks, and I meant it."

All five Lions on Eidolon had been enough to drive off the attacking Galra, but it wouldn't always be. They would need Voltron to carry on, and it was her duty to figure out how to form it with the rest of the team. She may not have had a Soul Bond with Black, not like Shiro surely had, for him to survive Zarkon in the astral plane, but she was still the Lion's paladin, and now it was time to act like it.

"After all," she said, "we must learn how to form Voltron. The real training begins tomorrow," she threw a stern look at Lance, who spluttered, "and I expect you to all be on time, bright and early."

Keith's gaze was steady. Although he was not the Black Paladin nor leader Shiro had hoped for, it seemed the boy was taking his obligation to support her seriously enough. "You can count on us, princess," he promised, elbowing Lance. "And Mr. Walk-on-Water over here."

Lance frowned, but then brightened. "I actually like the sound of that."

Allura pinched the bridge of her nose mostly to hide a smile. "You're all dismissed for the day. Rest."

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Pollux is full of flumes of smoke, and the landing pad on the outskirts of the Wall is no different. Kova is the friendliest thing to find him when he ambles down from his ship with all the grace of a ten year old, his limbs not quite gangly and definitively hardly grown, and Lotor scoops him up into his arms. It is a rare occurrence he does not travel with his mother—she hardly ever lets him out of her sight, but he supposes next to central command, Pollux under its current leadership is the second safest place for him in the galaxy. As crown heir, he has quite a lot of enemies, and it's something that makes his father laugh every time he brags about it in his best princely voice.

"Will he be your point of interest every time you visit?" Lotor looks up to see the towering form of his sister, and although her face is covered by her druid mask, he can hear the smile in her voice. He stops scratching under Kova's chin, the cat purring, and runs to hug her. Merla takes off her mask to pick him up. With him still a young child—Altean blood alone makes for an interesting mix, where decades are merely years, elongating the Galra lifespan by a considerable amount—and her a young adult, it is all too easy.

Lotor tugs at the new braid in her long white hair, and traces the red arcs shaped like lightning under her eyes, crawling further down her cheeks than it had the last time she'd visited. "Perhaps," he says, and she grins.

"Ah," Merla plays along. "So long as I am chopped therrak, I suppose I can put up with it. Mother has been treating you well?"
She's thinner, Lotor notes as he shifts against his sister. She must have been doing more magic recently. "Yes. She said I could watch her banish some of the dissenting druids, but she won't tell me why they're being banished, nor where they'll go afterwards."

Merla stiffens. "Dissenters are banished to the Other World, Lotor," she explains, a little hoarse. "A land suspended between life and death before they eventually succumb. You know that no one leaves Pollux. They're being banished were taking unauthorized doses of an unlawful substance."

He's a child though, and easily bored. "Have you been doing any superb magic lately?"

Her levity returns, as much as it ever exists. "I do have something special to show you," she promises. "May I put you down?" Lotor pouts but nods, and pulls Kova into his arms as Merla raises hers. Her eyes and hands flash white, the marks upon her face blazing, and then she holds a flower made of ever moving stardust. She bends down and holds it out to him. "Here."

It's enchanting, and Lotor grips it in his fist. The particles shift a bit more under his hand, but remain coherent enough to hold the shape. "It's beautiful. What is it?"

"A poor imitation," she says, "of the juniberries that used to grow on Altea."

His face lights up. Stories and songs, particularly from his sister, are all he has left of the old, otherwise forgotten planet that holds half of his heritage. He never remembers that his mother only set foot there for a few years, and that most of the Alteans he's known are descendants of the Banished Twelve, who left with Fala Morigin thousands upon thousands of years ago. He looks back at the flower in his hand.

"Will this one grow too, if I plant it?" he asks, already knowing he'll ask one of the servants to do it for him. A prince doesn't get his hands dirty; that's what Mother and Father always say.

Merla chuckles and smooths down his hair. "No. No growing thing comes from Pollux, little one." She stands up and takes his hand. "Come. It's not good for a young flower like yourself to be here for too long. Let's go see those banishments, shall we?"

The flower drops from his hand as she leads him away, Kova cradled in his other arm and purring mildly. Perhaps the darkness of the city and the masked inhabitants should scare him, but he is never scared when he is with Merla. If he is a young flower, like she says, then she is the thorns that guard his stem.

She will never let anything hurt him.

Remnants of his engine exhaust rustled his cloak as Lotor stepped out of his ship, and breathed in Pollux's salty city air. Dark towers rose to a sky that would have appeared to be a cave, if not for the shifting clouds and the twin crescent moons shining vague light. "Ah," he said with a cheshire grin. "You haven't changed a bit."

He hadn't come here often as a boy—Pollux had predominantly been the domain of his mother and sister—but he'd been once or twice. Enough to remember the low hanging lanterns full of flickering purple fire, the space station ancient and creaking and on top of the dark side of a motionless moon, suspended in orbit by the spells Fala Morigin had cast so long ago.

His mother's favourite druid, Tamlin, oversaw the spells now, and the cloaked Altean was waiting for him in the Sanctuary. There were longer lanterns hanging from the grand, arched ceilings. Incense burned like smoke and druids, mostly unmasked within the walls of their churches, bore
many features, their marks corrupted and curving the same way Merla's had under their eyes, but nowhere near as long or grotesque. Small tidal waves compared to her storm.

Tamlin's hands were white as bone, clasped in front of the golden belt tied around the waist of her robes. Her hood was drawn up but her dark hair was still visible, her mask off. Her face was weathered and thin with flaccid skin as pale as her hands. The crescent marks under her eyes curved towards her eyebrows, making her look rather perpetually surprised, and coloured a deep, blood red.

"Ah, Prince Lotor," she wheezed. She'd been the head priestess on Pollux since before Merla had run away six hundred years ago, and it was starting to show. Lotor didn't know why his mother didn't just replace her. "Your mother sent word you would be coming. We have made the proper accommodations—"

His mother never missed an opportunity to show off her line of work, after all, with how consumed Lotor was with his father's Empire. But Lotor couldn't help his general lack of interest in his mother's work. Powerful and dark and impressive it may be, he had not been blessed with enough Altean blood for their alchemy to access that power. He was by all accounts a Galra in Altean shape, and he had never pretended otherwise.

"I have no time for pleasantries," he cut in. "I am here to see your Seer, Cecillus."

Tamlin's fingers jolted as though they were about to snap, but she nodded, only muttering, "As you wish, young prince," and he was too tired from his journey to snap that he was a good few millennia older than her. He followed her silently down the hall, past wide arched doorways, most full of plants hanging from the ceiling, luminescent and plugged into various machines.

Cecillus' dwelling place was near the end of the hall, and he sat mediating beneath the statue of the moon goddess, Celeste. The goddess' hands were clasped around a tiny Altea, and under her bare heels was the severed head of her sister, Luna. The two were the twin moons of Altea, but Celeste had born the blanket of the longer night as compared to her sister, who had had a shorter orbit around the lost planet.

Cecillus' white hair was cropped short, his skin dark and markings blue. Runes were etched onto the back of his hands, jagged and from torn flesh now healed over. He was a handsome man, by all means, but Lotor hadn't come to be distracted by a pretty face.

"We've been expecting you," Cecillus said, his eyes still closed, but there was purple light glowing underneath his lids, turning them translucent. Lotor quirked a brow at Tamlin, and Cecillus elaborated. "The goddess and I. The moon mother has told me of your arrival, and of the questions you seek. The comet of meaning. The downfall of your enemies. The location of the traitor."

Cecillus opened one eye and revealed a vivid blue iris. "You do realize that General Sendak is dear to some of us? We made his arm. We broke him and reformed him."

"He's another one of my mother's pets," Lotor dismissed. "Made more in the arena than here." If Cecillus tested him again, and he had a good enough excuse, Lotor wouldn't hesitate to ruin the seer's pretty face. "And I am your future Emperor, so mind how you speak."

"The traitor's location is hidden from us," said Cecillus. "As it has been all these centuries. Whatever cloaking spell she has created, it is unlike anything we've ever seen. There is a bright spot, however. She seeks the same meaning you do."

"The comet?" Lotor exhaled.

"Your destinies will be intertwined again soon enough. I have seen it in my mind's eye. But there are
more players in this game you must be wary of. Voltron, and Altea's princess. The Black Lion has roared for her."

"I will handle Voltron's rebellion of imbeciles," Lotor promised. "Now, Sendak?"

"Will fall in due time," Cecillus said. "But so will all. The wheel still turns. Even moons must set."

"I intend to rise," said Lotor, his eyes glittering like the sun, like his mother's: a flash of tainted gold when he grew irritable. He straightened, his robes flapping behind him, and glared about Tamlin. "I wish to see my accommodations, now."

"Yes, sire," Tamlin grumbled. "Of course."

"And I desire more dosages be sent to my room," he ordered.

He would need them soon enough, after all.
Chapter Summary

The Blades put their plans in motion and Voltron disagrees. The Generals grow closer to confronting Sendak.

In her dreams, Allura saw Shiro and the Black Lion. Their eyes always glowed white, and Allura woke up, gasping, her cheeks wet with tears. Over the team's three nights back on Olkarion, she grew used to placing a hand over her heart to calm herself, and looking over to find the other side of her bed empty. A side that Shiro had never slept in, had never seen, but somehow the knowledge that he never would, the loss of all she would never have, stung more than ever. Black's link was a quiet comfort, and each night Allura curled her hand over the chip Shiro had left her.

She wanted to play it and hear his voice again so badly, but once she did there would be nothing left of Takashi Shirogane in the galaxy, and she couldn't have that. Not yet.

Her fitful sleep didn't help matters during the daytime, as they spent the next three days until Kolivan arrived trying to form Voltron.

Allura hadn't thought that having a new Black Paladin would make things easier, but she hadn't thought they would still be this hard. The sun was nearly setting over Olkarion's yellow horizon, and they had made no more progress than when they'd started in the morning. Why couldn't she do this?

Black had accepted her, wasn't that enough? She grit her teeth and shut her eyes more tightly, trying to reach through the Lion's connection to the rest of Black's sisters, to their team. They were there, steady. That should have been enough!

"Come on! Form Voltron!"

But, like every other time they had tried, nothing happened.

"We could give it one more shot," said Hunk sympathetically. The team's commlinks had been connected all day.

"No." Allura reeled her frustration back in. "It's alright. We should rest—and Lance has training with Coran now, anyway. Let's get our Lions settled in their hangars."

"I know we'll get it tomorrow," Lance chirped. He'd been much more cheerful ever since his elemental powers had come in, and she didn't want to 'rain on his parade' so to speak by pointing out he'd said the same thing the past few days, too. It was nice to him back to his usual self; he'd been so solemn since Shiro's... disappearance.

She set Black down with a clunk and buried her face in her hands once she released the Lion's joysticks, breathing deeply. The team hadn't been able to form Voltron right away even with Shiro at
the helm, at least not without the heat of battle, but she had thought with her having the knowledge
of the Lions, being the teacher to the paladins, and them being more experienced over the past year
they'd spent in space that things would be—that all she could give would be enough. But when had
it ever been?

Allura took her time in disembarking from her Lion, knowing Ryner would want to talk to her about
installing Balmeran crystals in some of the new Olkarion buildings once she had her way back to the
Castleship; the queen had refrained from asking Voltron for help in rebuilding directly, but Allura
different faced responsibilities as both the team's leader and commander.

She was letting the weariness sink into her shoulders as she walked out of the Lion's maw, and
started when she saw who was waiting for her at the base of it. "Keith?"

He had his arms crossed over his chest, still dressed in paladin armour, although he only frowned
when he saw her shoulders snap back up again. "You don't have to worry about Ryner," he said.
"Coran and I sent Pidge and Hunk to take care of it."

"Oh." The princess blinked and forced a smile. "That's very kind, Keith, but I should still likely—"

Keith shook his head. "Pidge loves all the tech stuff, and Hunk technically has more experience with
the Balmerans than you do. They'll be fine."

Allura sighed. She didn't have the energy to argue. "Alright," she relented. "Thank you for telling
me." She didn't know why he hadn't just done so over their comms, however, especially since the
team must have planned this without her at lunch for it to be so organized, not telling her because
they knew she'd put up a fight.

He seemed to sense it too, because he shifted. "About uh, the Black Lion," he said slowly, and gave
a weak cough. "It's okay, y'know. No one expects you to get it right away. Red didn't let accept me
as her paladin at first either."

She gave him a small, bitter smile. "None of you had my training, or knowledge. I—" She let out
another loose sigh. "I just can't seem to figure out what I'm doing wrong."

"You'll get it," he said. He swung his arms at his side for a moment, and then reached over and
placed a hand on her shoulder. "I, uh, believe in you. We all do." He squeezed her shoulder and let
go. "Shiro always did."

Her eyes crinkled, and she managed a real smile. "Thank you, Keith." She just had to keep trying.

"Don't thank me yet," he said, brightening. "I have something to show you first."

She tilted her head at him, her mouth ticking up into something close to a smirk. "I'm not sure I trust
your surprises," she said dryly. Most of them, she remembered, had seemed to involve decking
Lance in the face with snowballs when Olkarion had experienced some experimental weather,
during the three months they'd spent building the base. (Not that Lance hadn't hit Keith plenty of
times as well with the strange snow, but still.)

"You'll like this one," he said. "And it's really Hunk and Pidge's surprise, but—we all figured you've
waited long enough."

An inkling sprouted in her mind, and she let him lead the way over to the domed hall they hadn't
stepped foot in since their first day in the Castleship. Four of the cryopod-esque closets no longer
held paladin armour, nor did the bayards rest on their floating platform, but... There was her bayard
made by Hunk, remodelled and coloured pink along the band instead of black. And in the cryo-
"It's yours," said Keith, as she stepped closer. Paladin armour with mourning pink. "Coran told us the colour was important, in Altean culture, and he gave us your measurements—though we had to modify them a bit from ballgowns. Pidge and Hunk used some Olkari tech to get it, y'know, working properly, but... Lance was our guinea pig to make sure it was as indestructible as ours, but I think he mostly just wanted to be a model."

Her lips twitched upwards. "It's... it's lovely," she said, and meaning it. Her eyes traced the accents, spotting where Coran's careful hand and Hunk's eye for measurement would have come in. It looked like it would be a perfect fit. "And yes, pink does mean—we wear it to honour fallen warriors and family members." Her gaze flicked upwards from the main suit, and she realized something was amiss. "There's no helmet," she noted.

"Yeah." Keith didn't sound surprised or distressed, and she turned around to face him. He was holding a helmet in his hands, matching the suit's accents like everything else, but the cracked visor caught her off guard. Shiro's helmet. "Pidge found a way to change the colour with a little tech thing plugged in inside—it can be adjusted to anything, really—and we can get the visor fixed, or just make a new helmet but we thought—I thought you might—"

Allura hugged him, her hands curling over his shoulders. Keith went shocked and silent for a moment before one of his hands came up to cup her shoulder blades, the other cradling Shiro's helmet by her hip. "Thank you," she said.

Keith cleared his throat, and Allura pulled away. "He loved you a lot," the boy said.

Allura smiled. "I know. And he loved you a lot, too." She took the helmet in her hands and do plans to have the visor fixed. "Thank you."

Keith clapped her on the shoulder. "You're gonna get this, Allura," he said. "I know you will."

She did her best to believe him even once he walked away.

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Over the past few days Coran had developed some sympathy for Lance's old instructors at the Garrison. The paladin had described them, repeatedly Iverson, as "uncool" and "unable to see my true potential" which Coran has translated as demanding, uncouth, and dismissive. No teachers he wished to be like, and yet... Lance wasn't a particularly good student. He was hardworking, yes—when motivated—and had dreams of grandeur, but lacked the patience to develop the skill level to get there.

Which was how Coran found himself trying to hold his own patience together every day approximately two hours into their lessons, when Lance would get whiny and bored with whatever wasn't going his way. Mastering his element was hard work, after all.

"—how can freezing ice be so difficult?" Lance demanded indignantly.

Coran sat on the sidelines, his feet in the water while Lance stood in the castle's pool. Little chunks of ice floated around him, smaller than ice cubes. He hadn't been able to make the larger sheet Coran was encouraging him to try. He hadn't struggled with some of the other activities, although he'd been worryingly eager to see if he could breathe underwater (and damn the consequences). Increasing his swimming speed by having the water push him hadn't been difficult, either. Their current exercise, however, of freezing water, or indeed lifting water up and out of the pool, were things he hadn't been
"I should be good at this," Lance said, when all he could form was another ice cube. "I'm a boy from Cuba, I love swimming and the water!" His arms flopped down, creating slight splashes. "Maybe I'm too far away from Blue."

"Not so, Number Three," Coran corrected. "You were farther away from Blue when you ran on water. In a strong Lion-paladin bond, the distance between you almost never impedes your abilities or communication. Although not every paladin is talented with every ability. Alfor struggled with his own elemental powers."

Lance looked up hopefully. "He did?"

"And so did Sarli. It took time to get it. You've made quite a lot of progress in the short time we've covered." Coran's mustache twitched upwards. "You just need to be patient." He willed away the growing sadness in his chest. "What was it that Shiro always said?"

Coran could tell the paladin didn't like the idea of needing the same advise given to Keith, but the boy sighed, his shoulders hunching as though in defeat. "I get it. Patience yields focus." He swam up to the side of the pool and rested his elbows on the cool tiles, and Coran rested a hand on his shoulder.

"I think we've done enough for today," said Coran. "Come. Let's eat dinner with everyone else. We'll have an early start tomorrow. Kolivan and some of the Blades are arriving in the morning."

Lance perked up as he climbed out of the pool. "Is Lira with them?"

"I believe she's staying on Base Delta to continue her training for an upcoming mission," said Coran, handing him a towel. "Although I may be wrong. Keith would likely have a better idea. I know he's been in personal contact with his Uncle Thace sometime over the past few days."

"I'll ask him later, then. I've been meaning to talk to him lately, anyway."

"Oh?"

Lance dried his hair off with the towel. "Yeah. He really helped me through a rough patch in Eidolon, and..." He shrugged. "He's still struggling a lot with Shiro being gone. He could use someone to lean on. And I dunno, he's not as bad as I thought he was, back at the Garrison."

"First impressions are often wrong," Coran said. "Why, when I first met Alfor when we were boys, I was rather upset with him."

"Why?" Lance asked, smiling.

"My family had started working for his, but I was very disappointed we hadn't gone on to work for the royal family themselves. It seemed like a step down, and I was sure I'd follow in my grandfather and parents' footsteps. But it all worked out in the end." Coran's grin faltered. "Or at least, it all nearly did."

"He wanted to you to take care of Allura, right?" Lance said. "You're doing a pretty good job. He'd be glad you're here."

"Thank you, Lance," Coran replied, mustering up another smile. "Now, let's skip to it. You and I are on kitchen duty tonight, too."
Allura was checking in with Brizo when she got word Kolivan had landed on Olkarion the following morning. Antok had come with her to the scientist's lab, which was currently overrun with wires and had some water on the floor. Spawella's large tank that spanned a good chunk of one wall was full of water and the splashing space wall, the lid hanging above not placed to keep her more contained. Briz, meanwhile, was muttering to themselves as holographic blueprints flickered around them, all four hands typing at once.

For a moment, Allura wished the Blade wasn't with her. This was a private concern of hers more than anything else, but she wanted to be sure. Every day they came closer to when the Kral Zera would be held, and closer to when the Galra Empire would be stable again. If Merla presented herself as a challenger for the throne, and with what she could have been possible of, or even the unknown of what Lotor would be like... The Galra hadn't had Brizo working on nothing.

"Just a tick, princess and serious one," Briz said, not looking up from their work. "Just increasing the blaster power, and—" They looked up at Antok. "Does your commander care if I use ship blasters for the core of my guns?"

"The power you've already provided us with is enough," Antok said, mouth unmoving with his mask on. "What my commander wants to know is how precise your rifles will be, before we start outlining them to our soldiers."

"With the krun crystal from Eidolon, the blast can be regulated to two modes with a flick of a switch. The first is smaller and non-lethal, so long as it isn't aimed at the chest." Briz pointed at the diagrams and Antok and Allura's eyes followed. "The second is larger and explosive, lethal no matter where it aims. Your soldiers will be well equipped, Antok, serious one."

"What do you need more powerful guns for?" Allura asked Antok. They hadn't had much of a chance to confer with one another the past few days, in between everything on Olkarion and with her team. A few times she had inquired about something and received its classified, or you'll have to ask Kolivan, as a response.

"We're starting to implant more Blades into Galra supply bases, transportation hubs, prisons, training regiments. They will strike when the time is right, but they need to have the power to do so. We need to make sure it can happen soon, however." Antok's voice tightened slightly. "Blades never last long in the prisons."

"And you had a question, princess?" Briz said.

Allura pursed her lips. "Yes. When we met months ago, you were working on S.L.A.V.—self litigating artificial Voltron," she elaborated for Antok's benefit. "Yet the project for the Galra didn't go anywhere, as you worked on growing Spawella instead. I want to know what we might be dealing with."

Briz's face fell, and they toddled over to Spawella's tank. A small platform from the floor rose when they stepped onto it, and they placed two hands on the whale's smooth skin when she brushed against the surface, as though for comfort.

"The Galra wanted me to make a new Voltron. I told them it couldn't be done." Briz's voice quieted. "They didn't believe me. They gave me quintessence, I don't know what kind nor where it was from, and told me to get to work. I had to work on something, so I used my other resources to grow Spawellla, as a decoy and in hopes of having a future companion. There is no building Voltron."
They would need a very strong Altean alchemist, at the very least."

"So then why were the Galra asking you?" Allura pressed. "Why not the Druids in Pollux?"

"The Galra military does not trust them; too mysterious and Altean."

"So the Druids may be creating their own Voltron," Allura summarized, "and we have no idea. How wonderful."

"We may have a solution to that," Antok said. "But you will have to discuss the matter more with Kolivan."

She smiled tightly. Of course. "Well, he must be touching down on Olkarion soon—"

Antok cut her off. "In fifteen ticks."

Wonderful. She managed not to grit her teeth; she knew greeting Kolivan was more of a pleasantry than something he put stock in, but she still felt it was important for them to always be on the same political ground. He had a much larger rebellion than she did, the Voltron Alliance composed of far more factions.

She turned on her commlink, hoping one of her team would pick it up. "Paladins, come in. I have a favour to ask."

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The gusts of warm hair from the ship's engines as it landed made the collar of Keith's jacket feel hot, as the other paladins waited with him dressed in their casual wear. It was the sunny season in Olkarion, with low warm breezes and fields of farmland being properly cultivated for the first time in decades. Lance had forgone his jacket entirely, and rolled up his sleeves to his elbows.

Kolivan, expectedly, stepped out with a less than sunny look on his stoic face, Lira, Thace, and a Blade Keith didn't know as well, Regris, flanking him, all of them unmasked as they stepped off the ship. It was a slightly strange to see the commander without Antok by his side.

"Uncle," Keith greeted, although whether he meant it to Kolivan or Thace, he wasn't sure. "It's good to see you."

"Princess Allura will be joining us in a moment," Hunk supplied. "She and Antok were just conferring with Brizo, but they're on their way here."

"How have you been?" Lance asked Lira.

She looked tired, Keith noted, with bags under her eyes. "Busy," she said, giving Lance a tight lipped smile before she turned to Kolivan. "Commander, may I—"

"Yes."

She slipped her mask back on and then left with Regris, making a beeline for one of the other Blade ships were that docking. Keith shot Thace a questioning glance, but his uncle didn't give anything away, nor did he look surprised. Keith held back a sigh. And Kolivan wondered (possibly) about why he hadn't wanted the mark of the House of Maala. Although maybe if he took it, they would actually let him in on more Blade business.

But his loyalties were with Shiro, Voltron, and by extension, Allura. They had been begun to be his
family long before he'd found out his mother had any, and he couldn't forget that, even if he wanted information.

"Commander," came Antok's voice, and Keith had never seen Kolivan look more lightened than he did as he turned to face his arlan. Not that the lightness lasted long, but he was still somewhat clearly happy to be reunited with his partner.

It made Allura stand out all the more, Keith thought, as she and Kolivan shook hands, now that her partner was gone. "I hear you've already thought of a way to deal with the Druid issue," she said. "I hope you'll give me an hour or two to get my paladins up to speed? They're not too well acquainted with the finite details of Altean history."

Kolivan nodded, although he seemed displeased. "Of course, princess. My Blades have their own reports for me. I want the matter discussed between us by the end of the day, however. Time is short with the Kral Zera only eight weeks away."

"I'll be efficient," Allura promised, already dreading both conversations. Not that she didn't want to hear Kolivan's solution—indeed, she hoped it would be a good one—but she was tired. Although the team hadn't been forming Voltron, she'd still been lending her quintessence to Black rather ceaselessly the past few days.

The paladins followed her wordlessly back to their quarters on Olkarion, and she was glad when Coran joined them, exchanging glances and seemingly understanding what they would have to do now that the time had come.

"It is time," Allura said, gazing around at them, "for you to learn about Altea."

"Wow," said Hunk, once she was done explaining all she and Shiro had seen from Black's memories, Merla, and her family line included. "That's..."

"A lot to process," Pidge said, rubbing at their temples, and he nodded.

Allura clasped her hands together. "I refrained from telling you earlier because I did not want it to infringe on your willingness to bond with your Lions and because the issue, as you understand now, is quite complex."

Lance dragged a hand down his face. "No wonder Lira didn't like riding in Blue at first."

"And... Princess Merla?" said Keith. "She's out there, somewhere."

Allura nodded. "I have not been able to figure out her role in all of this, yet, if she indeed has one. But she is alive, and most likely a terrible threat. Haggar and the other descendants of Fala Morigin and the Banished Twelve have dwelled in Pollux for over 110,000 years. In all that time, they have never created another Voltron, but other weapons of destruction, like Haggar's robo-beasts, are still an issue. The Galra Empire is busy preparing for a new Emperor to take the throne at the Kral Zera in seven and a half weeks. This timespan is our best bet to destabilize the druids, and may help us learn more about Princess Merla."

"You think she may challenge Prince Lotor for the throne?" asked Pidge.

"It would be her birthright," Allura confirmed. "But as strange as it may seem, we want the Empire to remain as stable as possible. Through their process of colonization, we've seen what they've done to planets, and how other planets have been caught up, even unwillingly, in the crossfire of war. As
we free more planets, they can make their own decisions about whether to join the Alliance or not. But for planets still under Galra control, a conflict between different factions of the Empire would be disastrous. But, if we take destabilize the Druids, who are disparate and adjacent to the Empire—"

"The Empire can't rely on them anymore," Lance realized.

"Exactly. Particularly because many stores of quintessence are kept on Pollux. It would be a heavy blow, but a contained one at the same time."

"And what's the best way to destabilize them?" Hunk said, his brow furrowed.

"I'm not sure," Allura admitted. "Our best bet would be to hit their quintessence stores, but it seems Kolivan has a more specific plan in mind."

Keith shook his head. "Wait, shouldn't we be focusing on Lotor and the Empire? And making sure we can form Voltron? The druids could've had Merla back all this time, and nothing's happened."

"Nothing that we know of," Lance pointed out. "I'm with Allura. If we have an opportunity now, we should take it."

"But—"

"We can discuss and decide all of this later," Allura cut them both off before they could start squabbling. "For now, eat something. Once Kolivan and the Blades have conferred with us, we don't know how quickly things will have to be set into motion. You're all dismissed—Hunk, I believe you're on kitchen duty today."

She let loose a long sigh when the rest of the team filed out, Lance glancing back at her before he followed the others, and Coran came to stand beside her.

"There's something else on your mind," her advisor prodded, and Allura sighed again.

"Kolivan will expect a confirmation that we can form Voltron," she said in a tight voice, staring at the sun soaked streets of Olkaron. "And I'll have to admit my failure in front of him and the other Blades—me, the last of the royal House of Morigin, an Altean princess, unable to properly pilot the Black Lion." Her voice rose and broke. "And I don't even know why Black won't..."

"May I share something I've learned from Lance these past few days?" Coran requested, and unsure of where this was leading or how it related, Allura nodded.

"Yes, but I really don't want to talk about Lance right now."

"Lance's greatest strength and flaw is that he always has the utmost confidence he can do anything. Yours is your unwillingness to give up on the things you care about."

Patience wearing thin, she turned towards him with a pleading look for this to just be over. "Coran, I don't understand what—"

"While Black has accepted you," he said. "You have not accepted her."

That made her pause. "What do you mean?"

"You've accepted your place as the team's commander and leader," he said. "And you have accepted being Black's pilot. But you have not accepted being her paladin, because... that would mean Shiro is gone, for good."
Allura gaped. "What? I was the first to say we should move on, I was the one pushing for a new paladin, I presented myself to Black and—"

"—and a part of you still hopes he's out there." Coran placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know what you do when everyone else is asleep, and you cannot. You run coordinates on the bridge, searching for him."

Allura looked down, her face pained. She couldn't deny the truth. "Coran—"

"You haven't listened to the message he's left for you, have you?"

"I've had other things to think of," she mumbled weakly, tears building in her eyes.

Coran squeezed her shoulder. "Listen. It will help. And you can let go, and form Voltron, without having to give up on him. But you have to let him go, princess."

Allura reached up and hastily wiped at her face. "I'll... I'll try," she promised.

"I know." Coran gave her a tiny, sad smile. "I just want you to be prepared for the ghosts you may face. Neither of us know what to expect from Lotor, but Merla—she will not be the girl you once knew."

"I know," Allura said. "But neither am I."

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Fire pits flared when the Ring went dark, and the gladiators were herded back to their barracks. The common Galra soldiers who didn't have the credits to pay for the luxurious on board rooms slept out in the stadium steps, and the four generals found themselves among them. Ezor and Zethrid had nodded off, the former leaning on the latter, after a bit of bemoaning about missing any and all of the 'good fights,' so to speak.

Acxa could tell by Narti's breathing that, like her, she was still awake.

"Incredible," Acxa signed, Kova purring on Narti's lap. This was more discreet than Narti's telepathy when she would have to respond aloud otherwise. "How little the other two doubt."

"They live happier lives," Narti countered, fingers forming words in the dark, and Acxa snorted. "Granted, if we keep living like this..."

"It'll be worth it," she replied. Killing Sendak, a Kral Zera candidate, was against Galra law, but it wouldn't be the first time they had done something illegal, much less under imperial orders. It would be strange, considering how long he'd been in their orbit, but nothing out of the ordinary in the grand scheme of things. Working for Prince Lotor for the past six centuries had been when they'd broken the law the least, ironically enough.

"See," Narti pointed out. "You don't have that much more doubt."

"What do you doubt, then?"

"I know Sendak would be a better Emperor than Lotor," Narti said. "But that was the thing, isn't it? Sendak has the training, and Lotor has the bloodline."

"We both know neither of them should be sitting on that throne," Acxa said, before she crossed her arms over her chest.
Narti's leg reached over and poked her in the foot. "Enough muttering out of you," she signed. "Sendak is arriving with the dawn. We should sleep. We'll be woken with the morning din alongside everyone else."

Acxa sighed. "Alright," she signed, shifting to lie down similar to the way Ezor and Zethrid had hours before. "Goodnight, Narti."

Then, that gentle prod into her mind, as Kova curled up at their feet. *Good night, old friend.*

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Kolivan met them in the Castle lounge. Allura had gathered Coran and the paladins after less than an hour before they trudged out of their Olkarion base to the Castleship slightly below. She got them settled before she connected to Kolivan's comm, in case any of them had any last minute questions, barring none. The Blades arrived another twenty minutes later, led by Kolivan, and with Antok, Thace, Regris, and Lira in tow.

It was a little strange for Lira to be there, Allura thought. Antok and Regris were Kolivan's second and third in command respectively (seemed to be, for Regris) and Thace was his brother and a trusted Blade, but Lira was young and had been running rather standard missions most of the time, as far as Allura knew. Still, she didn't question it. Having a friendly face around was always reassuring.

Thace and Lira sat upon the couch armrests, but Kolivan, Antok, and Regris remained standing, the latter's tail flicking with impatience or irritation, Allura couldn't tell.

"Thank you for conferring with us," she began, all eyes on her. "I've briefed my team on the current state of the Empire, and the dangers the Druids pose. That is why I believe that now is the best time to launch an attack—"

Kolivan frowned. "I'm afraid you've been brought here under false pretences, Princess. I have not requested this meeting to talk about the Druids of Pollux. At least, not directly."

Allura blinked. "Pardon, Commander, but what do you mean? I—" She glanced at Antok. "I was operating under the assumption that's what our primary concern would be, until we could see the results of the Kral Zera?"

Kolivan stood. "The Blades have no intentions of waiting to see the results, Princess. If I may?"

She nodded, stepped away from the centre and keeping her eyes on him. This was her castle, in a way; at least he had shown her the proper respect.

"We have received confirmation that Prince Lotor and General Sendak will be duelling one another for the throne at the Kral Zera," Kolivan said.

"Sendak?" said Lance. "But we met that guy, he got ejected into space."

"He survived," Kolivan said, scowling at being interrupted, and Lance shrank back. "And a Blade within the gladiator rings has confirmed that he is heading towards the station near the heart of the Empire, and that Prince Lotor does not intend to fight honourably. His generals are waiting at the ring to assassinate Sendak."

"His generals?" Allura repeated.

Kolivan nodded ("Why does she get to ask questions?" Lance muttered to Keith, who elbowed him in the ribs). "Four elite fighters. They've drifted on and off our radar for the past six hundred years.
They used to serve under Princess Merla of the Galra Empire. There is little doubt, given their track record, that they'll be able to kill General Sendak, provided it's four-on-one."

"So you want us to protect the General?" she said slowly.

Kolivan's frown lessened. "I'm afraid not, Princess. The plan is to let Lotor's generals assassinate Sendak... while we assassinate the Prince."

"What?" She quickly cleared her throat. "Commander, I find that—"

"With both of Zarkon's chosen heirs out of the way, the Empire will dissolve into factions and begin fighting amongst itself. It will be more vulnerable and easier to bring down than ever before. It is not an opportunity we can miss. Lotor is in Pollux at the moment. It is the only time we will have a chance to carry out the mission—the Galra homeworld planets are too heavily guarded for us even to sneak a Blade in. Once he goes back to Zadai in a few days time, he will be untouchable."

"Wait, wait—" Allura shook out her hands. "Commander, you cannot be serious. To start a Galran civil war, the destruction that would cause, it—"

"It would allow us to bring down the Empire—"

"At what cost?" she demanded. "What about all the innocent people of captured planets, and Galran civilians alike, that will be caught up in the crossfire of infighting? Do you not care for your own people?"

"We're a rebellion against our own empire," said Regris. His claws were steepled together, his arms bent over his knees. "When we blow up ships, when we take down transports, who do you think we're killing? But we do it because we must free the galaxy from the Empire's tyranny. No matter the cost."

"And what about our opportunity to destabilize the druids? A chaos we can contain?" Allura said pointedly, rounding back to face Kolivan. "If we kill Lotor in Pollux, they'll lock up security. We won't get another opportunity."

"The druids are not a primary concern—" Kolivan said.

"So what?" she burst. "For once, the Altean threat isn't good enough?" She wrestled her temper back in, her voice cold and tight. "Commander, if you kill Lotor, countless others—innocents—will die. I cannot justify the destruction it would bring to kill the heir to the throne. Especially when all it might do is clear the way for Princess Merla to take it. I know she is alive. Possibly even working with the Druids right now."

Kolivan's eyes widened, and then narrowed. "Princess Merla is a phantom, a ghost. A rumour."

"I have seen her alive with my own eyes. She may be more dangerous than we can possibly imagine."

Kolivan let out a terse sigh. "All the more reason to go to Pollux to eliminate them both. If you are truly so worried about the druids, I can send another Blade in with the assassin to shoot at their quintessence wares."

Allura crossed her arms over her chest. "And who is this sole Blade you intend to send in?"

"Lira," said Lance behind her, and she turned around to face him, as Lira looked up, her face clouded. Kolivan frowned. "It's Lira," he repeated, "isn't it?"
"She's been trained for this," said Thace, surprisingly stern.

"And she managed to get into central command undetected," Antok added. "She's the best Blade for the job."

"Absolutely not," said Allura. "I cannot condone this. The mission is off."

Kolivan eyed her coldly. "You're acting under another assumption, Princess. We've told you of this mission as a courtesy. It will be carried out with or without your approval. Lira will be departing in the morning. But, please, if you want to send the paladins after us and risk their indispensable lives on Pollux, go ahead."

Lance and Keith stood up. "Lira isn't dispensable," Lance said shortly, but Kolivan paid him no mind.

Allura gritted her teeth. "Kolivan—"

"If all you have are rebuttals, Princess," he said, "then I believe we are done here."

Her breath came short and tight as Kolivan left the lounge without another word, the Blades following behind him, Lira's face shimmering as she put her mask on.

"Allura," said Hunk hesitantly, reaching towards her, but the princess held up her hand, trying to keep it from trembling as she kept her face turned away from her team.

"Not now," she said tightly. "I need to think."

She left the opposite way the Blades of Marmora had, her mind racing. She had to figure out what to do—and there was only one place now where she would get some answers.

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Morning in the Ring was signalled by the bells, and the remnant echoes were still sounding when Sendak set foot on the dark station. The doors of the station that led into the stadium creaked open as he stepped out of the landing bay. He'd speak to whoever was in charge—it should still be Plytox, even after a few centuries—and get himself in the Ring. Murder some prisoners and get the crowd excited. From there, it would be a simple en route to the last of the planets bearing the emperor's procession.

Provided Lotor hadn't left him any presents.

His new arm was more awkwardly weighted, old but functional as he let one of the nervous Galran sentries scan it and take his credits for room and board for the next three days. The elevator lifts separate from the ones used for prisoners were far slower—a security precaution for all sides—but he had little trouble finding his room.

The room was pitch black when the doors opened, and he stepped inside, his furry ears twitching. He could hear something that shouldn't have been there as the doors closed behind him, and he illuminated his arm, purple energy crackling and ready to strike, when he saw the five pairs of eyes glowing in the dark surrounding him.

The lights flicked on as the barrel of a gun was pressed against his head, and he heard the sharp voice of Merla's blasted general, Acxa. "Not another move, General," she said. "We have a few questions for you first."
Blood and Penance

Chapter Summary

The Blades go to assassinate Lotor. Lira and Allura face hard decisions.

ARC V: Honour

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Blood and Penance

"Hey, Allura."

Shiro's hologram was fuzzy along the edges, his whole being tinged blue, but his expression was soft and open, and a lump immediately rose in Allura's throat at the sight of it. The simple syllables of her name seemed to echo in her ears and around the sealed walls of her room. Black's connection was a faint ebb and flow in her mind, and Allura didn't have the spare attention to wonder whether she should push it away or to let it flood in; she just let it be, her eyes glued to the man glowing before her.

"I'm sorry, if you're hearing this. It's not what I wanted to happen at all. I didn't mean to leave you alone. I didn't want you to have to mourn me. You've already lost more than enough, and I—"

Shiro's eyes turned bright with tears, and Allura's heart twisted. "I'm so sorry, Princess. I wanted to be there, until the end. I wanted to finish what we started, with you. You don't know how many times you were my reason to keep on going, to get out of bed in the morning on days when everything felt impossible. And I know you didn't always believe everything you told us, but I know you always believed in me, and I—I'm sorry I let you down."

It would be useless to tell him he was wrong, that she couldn't argue with a dead man's hologram, but she felt a fight welling up inside her anyway. To die was painful enough, but to know he had felt all this shame and guilt over it too, in the moments before his death, made it so much worse.

"You didn't let me down," she gasped. "I let you down, I—I couldn't protect you—"

I wanted to protect you, she'd said, of secrets and long lost paladins, and the Black Lion's predecessor. But I cannot help that worry that this time, I may not be there to protect him, she'd told Lance, when Shiro had been at the Blades, before the base had been blown to bits. Shiro's survival. That is what I need guaranteed, from you. But the Blades hadn't kept their end of the bargain there, either. Angry tears burned her eyes.

Shiro continued, clearing his throat. "I hope Keith, if Black does accept him, can help support you now that I can't. That the team will too. I know you're probably better suited to Black than he is—they looked to you more than you know, in the beginning. I certainly did, in our worst moments, in the hardest choices we had to make—but I didn't want to put anything else on your shoulders." Shiro pursed his lips. "I hope I really did make things easier on you, that I lessened the weight on your shoulders in some ways. I know our work is far from over, even if my life is. I know that things are going to be hard, but..."
Allura gazed at his hologram, her chest tight and her throat raw, so many emotions raging inside her it felt like her own personal war, and yet again she was one soldier down in fighting it.

"I know you can do this," he said, gazing back at her, steadfast and smiling, even as tears trickled down his cheeks. Allura let out a sob. "You can do anything. You'll bring peace to the galaxy. I know you will. I just hope you know what an an honour it was to fight beside you. What a privilege it was to die for your cause, for something that mattered. You gave me a purpose beyond survival. You gave me a chance to be something other than broken. You helped me fall in love again, with the stars, with life. You made everything I've been through worth it, and... I was so lucky, to fall in love with you. I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me, since the moment we met, but I guess... all I can do is try, now. Allura." His eyes were shining, his voice rough. "Thank you. If there's such a thing as fate—and I'm inclined to believe there is, because something good led me to you, I know it did—or real justice in this world, everyone, the team included, will come to see you as you are: an amazing, incredible woman whose every star in the entire universe all put up together."

Shiro's eyes crinkled. "Thank you for letting me exist in the space in between, just for a moment. And although it better not be for a very long time," he added, almost mock stern, "I'll see you on the other side, when you're ready. I love you." He exhaled a final breath, and her heart constricted. "Goodbye, Princess."

Allura watched him lean forwards, glowing blue, and flick off the camera, and she was left alone in her room as his hologram fizzled out of existence. The marked chip lay there, her name etched in his lopsided handwriting, waiting to be replayed whenever she felt like it. Fire and grief flooded her veins.

She knew what Shiro would do—what Shiro had always done: protect the lives of the innocent, no matter the personal cost. And if that meant playing a dangerous political game, of allies and enemies and infiltration and sabotage... to protect the people other saw as mere pawns, even at the cost of the king—

The princess wiped at her face and got to her feet.

She was the Princess of Altea, last of the Royal House of Morigin the Evening Star, the Commander of the Voltron Alliance, and the Black Paladin of Voltron, and she would honour the love of her life and everything he had stood for, everything they had both believed in with every bleeding breath in this forsaken world.

She walked to the Black Lion's hangar and pulled on her paladin armour, one piece at a time, and then her helmet with the cracked visor.

She had an assassination to stop.

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Sendak chuckled, feeling the slight heat from the general's blaster aimed at his head. "I'm surprised you're here without your master. Haven't you always been the royal family's little pets?"

Acxa pressed the gun harder against his head. Zethrid growled and punched one fist into her hand. "Can't we do this the old fashioned way?" she whined.

"We have a lot of pent up rage," Ezor added, voice cheery even if her eyes were dark, and Acxa ignored both of them in favour of exchanging a quick look of sorts with Narti.

"If you want to live," Acxa said, stern as steel, "I would suggest not provoking the people currently
"And if you haven't killed me yet," Sendak said snidely, "the way your prince has surely ordered you too, then you must want something." Acxa's grip loosened on her gun for a second, and she didn't pull the trigger as Sendak turned around and faced them. "What is it, General? Power? Knowledge? I have plenty of both. Or is it something much closer to your heart?"

Acxa glowered at him. "Why would you know anything we don't?" she demanded.

Sendak smirked, ugly and smug. "I know about the weapon Lotor seeks. I know it would be in your best interest to find both of them, quickly and quietly. Take your pick."

She cocked her gun at him. "You are in no position to bargain."

"I could not differ more greatly," he said, and held up his prosthetic arm. The metal was old, rusted Altean runes etched into it, and connected to his arm by a thin beam of floating purple energy. Made by the Druids with the royal seal stamped over the elbow, and made with a type of alchemy Acxa hadn't seen in a very, very long time.

The arm holding her gun went slack. "Where did you get that?" she said.

Sendak grinned at the Generals, his eyes glinting. "Really?" he said, stepping forwards. Shadows shifted over his face. "You think I wouldn't keep a beloved gift from my darling betrothed?"

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Lira's gut churned as the Blade ship hovered outside of the Elysium System, the moon of Pollux suspended only a few ticks away by space shuttle. Her rifle was a heavy load against her back, perfectly balanced to her aim and grip, but she knew it would feel much heavier when it was time to do her job. This would hardly be the first life she'd taken, or the first time she'd carried out an assassination, but never had there been a job with so much riding on it.

"You'll do fine," said Uncle Thace, and guilt curdled when she wished it was Ulaz by her side instead. She loved Thace, of course she did, but he wasn't her blood, had never known her parents or her before the Blades had fashioned her into something sharp and decently deadly. What would her mother and father think of her now, a practiced killer at sixteen?

She swallowed back those thoughts. They didn't surface often, but now especially wasn't the time for any distractions, moral, guilt-ridden, or otherwise.

"I know," she said, standing. She passed by the small radio Thace had to communicate with Kolivan back at Base Delta, and looked towards the tiny hangar where her solo shuttle was waiting. "I just wish the princess had understood. Her knowledge of alchemy and access to Altean tech would have been a valuable asset to this infiltration."

Thace followed. "You don't want her to think less of you."

Lira's jaw clenched. "What we feel doesn't matter."

"No," Thace agreed, because he was a Blade as much as she was, "but what we fear does."

"Fear is a distraction," Lira shot back. "It is time for war... like the galaxy has never seen." She glanced back at the radio and adjoined holopad. It blinked red. Kolivan's signal.

"It's time," Thace echoed, taking her by the shoulders. "Are you ready?"
Lira mentally recounted her plan. Fly in through a crack in the barrier in her shuttle. Get in through the vents and use the schematics downloaded onto her Blade if necessary. Take out Lotor: a single, clean shot. There was no exit strategy, but she'd known that when she'd accepted the mission. She'd steal a ship and carve a way out, no matter the odds Kolivan had given her. She couldn't leave Thace, too.

She exhaled, and stepped towards her shuttle. "I'm ready."

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It'd been a sleepless night for the paladins, and Allura watched as they pulled on their armour amid stifling yawns. If she could have given them more time after Lira's departure, she would have; her plan was already risky with the team at the top of their game, never mind tired and sluggish, but there was nothing she could do to change it. At the very least, her team had responded well to her plans. Hunk and Pidge had rigged up cloaking devices for the rest of the Lions quickly, thanks to updates from Brizo (did the scientist ever sleep, Allura mused) and Olkarion tech. Other than a brief tussle with Keith over whether to bring all the Lions or not—"Black and Red are the fastest, if we just need go in and out to stop the attempt—" he'd argued—the severity of the situation, and the reality they'd need Voltron to get out alive, had sunk in.

Allura just hoped her moment of truth would hold fast, when it came.

And thank the Ancients for Lance, who had helped to solve their biggest problem, as Hunk's question had been a very good one.

"Say we pull this off," the Yellow Paladin had said, close to midnight, "and we get into Pollux all fine and dandy. Isn't the place massive? How are we even supposed to find Lotor before Lira does? Or know what he looks like?"

"The Blades download important information onto their Blades," Lance remembered, frowning. "Lira must have the schematics and picture of the prince on her. She plugged her Blade into the Castle's database once. Pidge, couldn't you use that to hack her Blade now?"

"I can try," they shrugged, typing away. "If I can't get the schematics from her Blade, I can probably hack into Pollux's mainframe once we're on planet. It's not perfect, but—"

Allura pursed her lips, nodding. "It'll do."

"And the target?" Keith said.

"Might have an easier time with that," Pidge had said, cracking a smile. "It'll take longer to hack into her Blade, but there's a lot of pictures of Prince Lotor—he's one of the most recognizable people in the entire Empire, with how much he likes to throw his status around, apparently. Here, look—"

A hologram not tinged in blue sprang up from Pidge's holopad, depicting a narrow, purple faced young man in his mid or late twenties. He had shocking long white hair and pointed ears, all too Altean, fangs and his mother's cruel eyes. Objectively handsome, perhaps, but something dark lurked too fiercely behind his features for him to be appealing rather than disturbing. At least to anyone with sense.

But perhaps that was just Allura's perspective from looking at a ghost, a shadow of the man's sister she'd known much better. The family resemblance was striking; the siblings could have been twins, if they hadn't clearly been born at least centuries apart. Merla's face had been a bit wider, her hair framed her face differently, her eyes yellow more often than not, but she'd been... not kinder, but
softer, somehow. This prince seemed to be cruel just because he enjoyed it.

"That is Prince Lotor, alright," she said dryly, glad when Pidge put the hologram away. She didn't want to think too much about how she was risking all of their lives to protect Haggar and Zarkon’s spoiled heir in order to prevent millions from dying in his stead if they didn't.

Lotor and Merla's faces blurred together in Allura's mind as she got the castle's wormhole ready, and primed for the Elysium System. If Merla had gone to the Druids, she'd be seeing them soon enough. Other Alteans too, long since turned traitors, but all that was left of her people all the same. But she couldn't get distracted. She couldn't let shock or spite take her out of the present on a mission this dangerous.

"I'll bring the Castleship outside of the system," Allura reiterated, knowing they'd gone over this plan before, but it made her feel better to say it out loud again. "And we'll take our cloaked Lions into Pollux. Pidge, since we couldn't hack into Lira's Blade, I need you to get the schematics once we're on the inside. Once you have them, we'll split into teams. Pidge and Hunk, you'll search the south side of the Sanctuary for Lotor. Keith and Lance, you'll search the north. Do whatever it takes to stop the assassination. As for me—"

"—you'll be taking out stores in the quintessence vaults," Hunk finished, holding up a finger. "We know, Princess. We're as ready as we'll ever be, right now."

Allura tried to scrounge up a grateful smile for him. It didn't mean they were ready, however.

But there out of time, and she guided the Castleship through the wormhole, and waited until they reached the other side.

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"Merla hated you," Acxa spat. She could remember the look of barely concealed anger on the princess' face when the Emperor and Empress had announced her engagement to their favoured General. Never mind the way it was a political ploy for Sendak to have a better claim of the throne, and undermine Merla's own despite being more powerful and Sendak's senior by a good few thousand years.

"Perhaps," Sendak drawled. "But her gift was still useful." His arm crackled with energy manifested as purple lightning. "But you still haven't chosen which weapon you want to know. So, which is it?"

Acxa regarded him, feeling Ezor and Zethrid watching to see what she would do, Narti waiting patiently. She geared up her gun, aimed it at Sendak, and then fired it quickly at his knee.

Blood spurted as an explosive curse left the larger general's mouth, and Sendak glowered at her when his knee buckled slightly. "You bitch—"

"Like I said," she sneered. "You're in no position to bargain. The comet. Merla. You're going to tell me exactly what I want to know." They didn't have much time before someone—anyone—who had possibly heard the gunshot came to investigate. She switched on the muffler, hating that she'd let her emotions make her forget precautions for even a minute, especially now that she'd played her hand.

"Your arm," Acxa said, when Sendak stayed silent. "Why wear it after six hundred years? Why keep it at all?" She levelled her gun at his other knee and Sendak's orange eye glowed with hatred as he wrenched his mouth open.

The arm, Narti prodded in her mind, and Acxa nodded. They had certain priorities to keep too.

"Your arm," Acxa said, when Sendak stayed silent. "Why wear it after six hundred years? Why keep it at all?" She levelled her gun at his other knee and Sendak's orange eye glowed with hatred as he wrenched his mouth open.
"It holds information," he said. "Numbers. Coordinates, maybe. I've had my men try decipher it, and a few of the Druids, but no one has been able to. But I didn't dare give it to the palace brat."

At least the lack of respect Lotor and Sendak held for each other was mutual.

"Well," Acxa said, breathing slowly, "we're not no one." She jerked her head forwards. "Ezor, Zethrid."

Zethrid was on Sendak in a flash, wrangling him into a chokehold before he could do much more than splutter, while Ezor worked on undoing the latches of the arm and getting it off him. Pieces of wire and bolts came away with slivers of skin and a spatter of blood, not unlike the one spilling from Sendak's injured knee. He hollered loudly when the arm popped free, and Zethrid hefted it into hers. Still, Acxa felt no sympathy. Sendak had done just as much harm to their lives as anyone else.

"Now, the comet," she said. "When is it coming?"

"You mean your master hasn't told you himself? You really are his pets—"

She shot out his other knee, and Zethrid released him as he dropped to his knees. "The comet, Sendak."

"Is coming at the Feast of the High Moon," he puffed out, "under the stars of the constellation of Celeste, at—"

"The solar system 00-8," Acxa finished, glancing back at Narti. So the reports of him near the Northern Fraction hadn't just been a red herring after all. They'd have to narrow down the planet and coordinates, but they just had to find where the stars of the constellation of Celeste actually lay, and that would point them in the right direction.

We have enough? Narti asked, and Acxa turned back to Sendak, her gun poised.

"I believe we're done here," she said, and tucked her gun into her belt.

Ezor grabbed her arm when she went to pass. "You're not going to kill him?" Ezor hissed, brow furrowed in worry.

Acxa slipped out of her friend's grip. "You," she said tersely, "need to learn how to play the long game."

They needed time to decipher the arm before they presented it to Lotor as proof of Sendak's death. Time to get to the 00-8 system and find the stars, and the comet, and any of the materials required for any of it. Time they wouldn't have if they followed through on the mission, and Lotor saw fit to 'reward' them with other tasks. They'd spent six hundred years waiting for a chance like this. She wasn't about to let it go to waste.

Acxa exhaled once they all exited out into the hall, wondering whether Sendak would bother to keep himself from bleeding out after all. Keeping Sendak alive, and a thorn in Lotor's side, was their best bet to getting that time.

Or at least, she hoped.

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Pollux had been the place of nightmares, in the stories Allura had grown up hearing. Haggar had
never talked about her birthplace much, when still masquerading as Aunt Honerva, and talking of the clandestine moon was an unwritten taboo among the Royal House of Morgin. It looked the way it did in the stories though, with buildings scraping the purple sky, the Wall surrounding the Sanctuary that rested beyond the loading docks. Their Lions were landing within the wall, and Allura led her pride as Black rumbled uneasily through their link. Black let out a low rumble through their connection, and she could feel the unease of the other Lions. Being so close to a shadowed version of their own energy, to this much quintessence, must have brought back painful memories of creation for them.

But more than just distaste for the massive amounts of quintessence, surely extracted unethically, seemed to be ebbing from Black. Allura's throat tightened. Had Shiro been brought to Pollux, too, during his days as Zarkon's prisoner?

"I know girl," she said, jostling her joysticks in a way she hoped was soothing. She hoped they wouldn't have to form Voltron to get out of this, but she had to be ready for that challenge if it arose.

"Is everyone in position?"

She caught a glimpse of Pidge, cloaked in the strange filtered light of invisibility, land likewise within the Wall of the inner ring of the city. That was the signal. It was time for the infiltration—and Ancients knew they had limited time to save an enemy from their allies.

"Yes, princess," her paladins answered, voices steady and serious.

Allura landed Black a good fifteen feet from Pidge, and a shiver snaked down her spine when she set foot on the moon's cool ground, and not just because of the risk they were all about to undertake. The crack in her visor split the Sanctuary's dark and tall skyline down the middle, and she narrowed in on the tallest tower.

*Where do you stay, when you're on Pollux?* she'd asked Merla once, and her old friend hadn't smiled.

*In the tallest tower, above the quintessence stores. They extend all the way down to the dungeons.*

Had architecture or storage facility changed in the last 10,000 years? Allura pointed to the tower.

"We're going in through there."

"Are you sure our jetpacks will have enough fuel for that?" Lance said. "It's probably not how Lira got in—"

"It's suitable for us," she said. "We can make it up there, and I can find the closest druid and steal their uniform. We can't be easily snuck up upon either. And the whole reason we are on this mission is because we are *not* the Blade of Mamora, Lance. Are you sure you and Keith will be able to handle hunting her down?"

"We're fine, Princess," Keith said shortly, shooting Lance a warning but not unsympathetic look, and they headed around the short bend of the Sanctuary to the tower.

They'd landed on an unguarded side, as according to plan, dark poplars lining the pathways and windowless wides of the Sanctuary, with lawns of tidy black and purple grass resting out front. Two masked Druids were posted by the wrought iron door that looked more like a gate. Two Altean traitors, Allura thought with a huff. The door gate behind them wasn't shiny, and certainly not new, but it didn't look like it had ever truly rusted, either. The air filters in their helmets kept out most of the taste of salt, but Allura could taste it through the crack in her visor, and the distinct sting of smoke as they crept over to one of the taller trees by the tower. They scaled it, half climbing and half using their jetpacks to get up and hide among the branches, trusting the dark purple leaves to provide some
camouflage.

They went up to the highest branch and jumped, lighting their jet packs mid air to reach the window at the top of the tower. Allura gripped the old windowsill made of crumbling stone, and then hefted herself up and punched through the glass window pane in one blow. It shattered, and she pushed through, glad her paladin armour couldn't get snagged on the shards the same way her old paladin suit might have.

She dropped to her feet on the other side, landing in a circular room made of stone with purple fire flickering in torches. Keith and Lance climbed through beside her, followed by Pidge and Hunk. Allura slinked down the adjoining spiral staircase, this floor of the tower empty, and she watched as stone gave way to more modern metal, the violet flame never changing. She paused to listen when they reached the foot of the staircase, her ears pricking.

Keith perked up too. "D'you hear that?"

"No," Lance grumbled. "Not all of us have alien ears—"

"Shush!" Hunk whispered furiously at both boys who clamped their mouths shut, and Allura made a mental note to thank him for it later.

"It seems like there's one guard outside this door," Allura said. "But there may be more. Have your bayards at the ready." Part of her wished that letting the alarms be sounded would be an easy solution to get Lotor's guard up, and him moved somewhere safe, but from what little she knew of Pollux, if they got caught, she doubted they'd be able to escape unscathed. Their goal was to extract Lira and get out of here as quickly and quietly as possible to make sure everyone got out of this with their lives intact.

She gripped her own bayard and it shimmered into a sturdy staff, seeing flashes of light in the corner of her eyes that meant the others were transforming their own as well, before she nudged the large oak door open. They burst out into a cold, stone hallway with strange electric lights in the metal ceilings, and two druids stationed by the door whirled around to face them.

Allura bashed one over the head with her staff, and Pidge wound their whip around the other's legs, sending up a shockwave of electricity, and both Druids crumpled on the floor. Hunk grabbed the feet of the first druid, and Lance and Keith each took a leg of the other, and Allura shut the door behind them all once Pidge slipped back inside the tower as well. The Green paladin set about unwinding their whip as Allura bent down, staring at the two barely breathing druids.

Her hands shook as she reached to remove the mask of the taller one who was a little closer to her height, and she saw a pale, but unmistakably Altean face staring back at her, long lashes and markings and all, although these ones were blue swirls. Her people. Or all that remained from them, split millennia ago.

Hunk bent down beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You okay, princess?"

She swallowed hard. They all had a job to do. "I'm fine." She laid the mask down and then set about taking off the robes, grateful that they were undergarments still covering the druid underneath, and more blue swirls lining their skin amid the cloth. The robes were large enough to fit over her paladin armour and still look normal, and she took a deep breath before fitting the mask over her helmet, clicking it into place. The stench of smoke and salt was almost overwhelming even through her visor, and she felt her earrings ping, as magic or magnets kept the mask from slipping.

"I trust you all," she said, glancing back at him and hating the way she sounded under the mask,
even if they showed no discomfort through the slits she could see out of, "to carry out this mission, but if anything goes wrong, contact me immediately. We're here to save Lotor's life and prevent a civil war, but his life is not worth any of yours." She couldn't lose another paladin. Not again. "Do you understand?"

Lance stared straight at her. "We know, Allura. We'll be careful."

"Be safe, Princess," said Keith, and then they all ducked out the door and went their separate ways.

Pidge and Hunk headed south, Pidge's datapad tucked under one arm and already with hacking software downloaded onto it. Keith and Lance moved north, up a staircase and towards a hallway that should've held some of the ventilation systems. She could hear all four paladins footsteps fade as they moved deftly through the dark halls, the Sanctuary so sure in its safety they obviously didn't mind having only a few guards.

Allura ducked around the walls of the tower behind her, and found the staircase that led below, and went deeper into the nightmare still.

"Remind me why we're taking the vents again?" Keith grumbled, when his elbow hit the tight metal wall for the umpteenth time. It felt far too familiar to crawling through the Blade of Marmora's maze during his Trials, and the awful flashbacks that had gone with it.

"Because we don't want to be spotted?" Lance hissed from ahead of him, and resisted the urge to kick him in the face. "And it's probably what Lira did, too. Let's just be glad Pidge got us the schematics in only a few ticks."

"Are you worried about Lira?" Keith scoffed. The vent began to widen. They were getting closer to what Pidge had labelled the drop zone, AKA the most convenient place for an assassination or ambush on the north side of the Sanctuary. There were rafters and beams, old infrastructure that hadn't been changed too much, and plenty of hiding places. The hallways underneath the beams were a bit more crowded, but there were some old alcoves that had housed now removed statues of Altean gods and goddesses they could hole up in.

"No," said Lance, sounding utterly unconvincing.

"Good, because you shouldn't be," said Keith, "because she's Lira, and she's a soldier, and she's been in this fight longer than any of us. She knows what she's doing."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean she's going to be okay," Lance said, his tone turning terse. "You heard what Kolivan said, about her being dispensable, and how dangerous this mission is—"

"Well that's why we're also here to save her," Keith huffed. "Now keep moving, I don't want to keep staring at your butt—"

Heat rose to Lance's face, but he pushed onwards until they were looking down over the opening in one of the vents. Hot steam blew in their faces, the ventilation system old and not particularly efficient, but it didn't seem like any of the druids passing by down below cared. It was hard to tell if there were any more once a pair passed from this angle, and Lance got sick of craning his neck, his helmet bumping the low ceiling of the vent. There had to be a way to get closer without getting caught.

"Why don't we do what Allura did?" Keith suggested. "Drop down and steal their robes?"
Lance shook his head. "The hallway might have more than we can see at first glance, and didn't you fight a druid once?" Keith's hand had healed, but cramping for days afterwards, even if everything had been overshadowed by Allura's capture. "I say we follow Pidge's schematics to a better drop off point, and then split up to cover more ground. Maybe they can latch onto Lira's Blade signature with a little more time. Come on."

He nudged Keith in the arm with his foot, and they kept moving until the vents split off in two directions, left and right, the same way they did on Pidge's schematics. Lance pulled the hologram up briefly from the datapad built in his armour's gauntlets. He knew which places Lira tended to favour, after infiltrating Alpha-Traz together. She'd want more rafters to perch upon, or something like a balcony, and those were more north, towards the left. And as much as Keith called Lira his cousin, Lance didn't know if he trusted the hothead to ask questions first and shoot second if he lost his temper, under this much pressure—even if his gun was set to stun.

"I'll go left," Lance said, "and you go right?"

Keith frowned, seemingly at being told what to do, but he nodded. "Okay."

"Keith?" Lance called, right the other boy started to leave. Keith glanced back and something in Lance's chest twisted. "Don't do anything stupid."

Keith smiled a little. "You too," he said, and then they went their separate ways.

Lance crawled through the vents for maybe another fifteen minutes before he scaled down from the vents into the rafters, dropping onto a deserted level. Pidge had sent them both the latest update, and Lira was supposed to be around here somewhere, her exact location flickering; she must have cloaked her Blade's tracking signal, at least partially. Hopefully Keith would make his way here soon, so they could search together.

Lance moved past a row of what looked like observation decks overlooking an inside garden of some kind. There were more dark poplars below the balconies, but they grew glittering jewels instead of fruit, and seemed to flourish under the florescent lights hanging above. Lance hoped that one day he wouldn't be looking for her while in dangerous purple buildings, as each balcony and rafter turned up nothing, but it seemed like that day wasn't today.

Man, this place was creepy. The sooner he found Lira the better—

"Lance?"

He skidded to a stop at the entrance to one of the most shadowed balconies, and saw Lira standing in front of him, the eyes of her mask glowing in the dark. Relief made him step forward, and be unprepared for the way she shot out and kicked his legs out from under him, grabbing his bayard with one hand as she rose, her blaster held in the other. Back aching, Lance grabbed her legs and yanked her back down, elbowing her in the mask when she fought against him, and he managed to knock his bayard out of her hand as both it and her mask went in opposite directions over the floor.

He grabbed his bayard and it transformed to his gun in a flash. He hoisted himself to his knees, kept his gun propped on one, and found her aiming her rifle at him, her hair slightly wild and her eyes narrowed, her mouth a thin firm line, both of them locked in a standstill.

Lance exhaled. "Lira."

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Allura found the storage rooms with little difficulty. She merely followed the straight hallways that
bled into one another, and only took a few wrong turns into dead ends, which were easily fixed by
doubling back around. Eventually the hallways narrowed and she walked into a wide chamber,
eerily deserted, although she could feel the heat radiating even through her robes and armour;
nobody wanted to be around the vast amounts of quintessence for longer than necessary, she
supposed.

The quintessence stores looked like age old dungeons converted into a manufacturing plant. Tall
shelves rose to the high vaulted ceilings, and were filled to the brim with thick phials of quintessence
that were every colour of the rainbow. Most of the phials were white or a putrid yellow, only a
handful a solid, clear gold.

Allura inched closer. There were markings—Galran—etched into the bottom lids of the golden
phials. Faded, but it was one of the only words in Galran she’d ever learned to write: MERLA. The
princess's quintessence, or the phials set aside for her use, for whatever they were used for? The
Galra hadn't been dependent on quintessence before the war.

"Ah, good. One of you is actually here for once."

Terror took her by the throat as Allura turned around to see Prince Lotor striding towards her. He
was lean and tall, wearing dark Galran armour, and had long, flowing white hair. His tone was
somehow both pleasant and annoyed—entitled, that was it—and he didn't smile. Her heart
hammered, and she was glad he couldn't see her eyes as she quickly scanned their surroundings,
looking for a lithe figure hiding, waiting, with a rifle, but she found none. Was Lira not here then, or
was she just excellent at hiding?

Then she realized she'd stayed silent for too long, and Lotor let out an impatient huff. "You know, it
is customary to bow to royalty."

Merla had always said the same thing, her eyes gleaming in amusement whenever they had visited
each other. They'd formed a tradition of embracing rather than curtseying.

"My apologies, Your Highness," she said, hastily bowing low.

Lotor seemed snidely pleased. "I need a dosage for my generals," he said. "They're almost out, and it
won't do to have them die on me so suddenly. They still have jobs to complete for me."

"Of course, Your Highness." Four elite fighters, Kolivan had said. They've drifted on and off our
radar for the past six hundred years. They used to serve under Princess Merla of the Galra
Empire. There is little doubt, given their track record, that they'll be able to kill General Sendak,
provided it's four-on-one. "What sort of quintessence do you require for them, with their line of
work? I've noticed the stores of your sister's are diminishing—"

Lotor threw her a cold look, and she shut her mouth. "My sister's is reserved only for the royal
family, not our pets. Are you new, here?" He narrowed his eyes. "Surely you must known it is
forbidden here, in Pollux of all places, to speak of her."

There was no Shiro to help her out now, and she stammered, "I—forgive me, Your Highness, I—"

"Take off your mask," he said. "I want to know who to report to Tamlin, if you are disagreeable
again."

Her heart raced. If Lotor was here, and he hadn't been taken out by now, Lira must not have been
here, still searching for him elsewhere in the Sanctuary. She couldn't take off her helmet without
disrupting the robes and her mask, and thereby giving her identity away. There was no way to
contact the team really, except to turn on her commlink and say something, which would mean running to the same problem as before.

"My face is quite ugly, Your Highness," she said, trying to sound steady but respectfully scared at the same time. "But my name is—" She backed up when he stepped forward, and his eyes snapped behind her, fixated, before they widened. Allura quickly looked back. Merla's phials were glowing, and the tips of her fingers felt tingly. She quickly stepped away to the side, and the glow faded slightly. It was... responding to her?

Oh no.

She turned back to Lotor, an excuse or something of the sort in her mouth, when he reached forwards and ripped her mask away. Allura sprang back, whipping off her robes and deploying her bayard into its staff form.

"I am Princess Allura of Altea," she said, "Commander of Team Voltron and the Voltron Alliance, and your eventual doom—but right now, I am here to save your life. Don't do anything foolish."

"Oh yes," Lotor sneered, looking far too calm. "Merla told me all about you. Talented, naive, asleep. Don't you like what my parents have done with the galaxy while you've been gone, both your father and poor Black Paladin too weak to stop them?"

She fought to keep her temper. "Didn't you hear me, Lotor? I'm here to—"

"I don't need saving, Princess," he continued. "You think I didn't know the Blade of Marmora would take this opportunity to eliminate me? I don't come to Pollux often for a reason, and it's why I've set up such a convincing decoy."

"You're good," she hissed, "but you're bluffing—or why else are you reaching for your blaster?" She swung her staff up to deflect the laser he shot at her, and he frowned for once, face marred by rage. "None of these Druids care much for you, do they? They admire your mother, and you weren't given your sister's gifts."

She'd clearly struck some kind of nerve, as his eyes widened in anger. "No," he snarled, "but they do obey." He shot his blaster right at her and she ducked, spinning around to see it hit some sort of control panel on the wall behind her. An alarm sounded, echoing around the low walls of the dungeon. "And now all of Pollux knows you're here. But don't worry about your Paladins and the Blade girl. I have much slower deaths in mind for them."

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"Lira," he said again when she didn't waver. "Don't do this. You know this is wrong." Then, to clarify, "The assassinating Lotor part, not the pointing your gun at your friend part, although that doesn't help either."

"You're one to talk," she said tersely. "And I wouldn't have to, if you and your princess would just learn to stay out of our war. I expect the others are here too?"

Lance moved to his feet, keeping his gun pointed at her, his finger hooked over the trigger, same as hers. "You think this isn't Voltron's fight?" he demanded. "You think the other paladins and I didn't leave everything behind to fight in it? Shiro died—we've all almost died, countless times—we've made more headway in this war in a year than the Blades have in a thousand! I thought that would mean something to you." He swallowed hard. "I thought I meant something. And Keith, and Allura, and everyone else. I thought we were friends."
Lira frowned at him. "I'm doing what has to be done, Lance. To bring down the Empire. Don't make me hurt you."

He puffed out his chest, scowling. "How do you know I won't hurt you?" he said importantly, even as the words made his stomach twist.

"It's like I said before, at Alpha-Traz. You're no soldier."

He took a step forward, even as she lifted her rifle up a bit higher in response, aimed towards his head. "Maybe you could be more than one. There's more to life than war, Lira. Do you really want to just create more it? There are better ways to bring down the Empire. We have Voltron. We can do this, together."

"This is the best shot the Blades have had since the war began," Lira said. "You think you understand war just because you've been in it for a feeble Earthling year? I was born into it. I lost my family—I lost everything to it. I want to see the end of it at the very least, to know I've fulfilled my part in some way, in Dylak's divine plan."

"You're not the only one fighting for your family," Lance said sharply. "But what would yours think? Your parents died because they got caught up in the crossfire, punished for a poor rebellion that they weren't even a part of. How many more kids do you think are going to lose their parents, Galra or not, if you start a civil war by killing Lotor?"

Her face softened by a fraction. "Lance—"

"You know this is wrong," he pressed, stepping closer. He eased his finger off his trigger, even if he didn't dare lower his gun entirely. "Lira. Please. Trust me."

Her frown deepened, as her eyes met his. "You really believe that letting him live is the best path forward?" she said, tone unreadable.

"I trust Allura."

Lira held her rifle more tightly. "I asked what you think," she said, more tartly.

"I do," he confirmed. "And I know somewhere deep down you do too. I know you, Lira. You have a good heart. And we will take Lotor down someday, I promise, but not like this. Trust me."

Lira stared at him a moment longer, and then lowered her gun to her side, and Lance hastily did the same as she approached him, her eyes trembling. "Fine," she ground out. "I trust you. Just don't make me regret—"

Lira crumpled without even a cry, and Lance's face whitened in panic when he saw Keith standing over her. He stepped forward and pushed at his teammate's chest. "What the hell, Keith, she just—"

Keith lowered his bayard. "She's just stunned, relax. We need to give Kolivan an excuse as to why she couldn't carry out the mission, don't we?"

Lance had to admit he had a point, even if he hated that Keith did. "Fine. Let's just tell the team and get out of here." They bent down and each slung one of Lira's arms over their shoulders, lugging her along. Lance made sure to pick up Lira's fallen mask. "Allura should've found the quintessence stores by now, and this place is awful—"

A rush of panic and adrenaline shot through him, and Blue's warm thrum, and a quick glance at Keith told him the Red Paladin had felt the same thing with his own Lion, and that could only mean
one thing. One of them was in trouble, and the Lions were coming to save them.

"Guys?" Pidge's voice popped up in their comms as soon as Lance and Keith flicked theirs on. "I found Allura's signature. Black is moving towards her now. Get outside and find your Lions. We can have an easy flight out of here if we move fast enough."

"Roger that, Pidge," said Keith, and he and Lance nodded at one another. "Let's go."

"Well then," Allura shot back, and felt Black's quintessence fill her veins, "you forgot who you were dealing with." She turned and threw her staff into the nearest phials of quintessence, and watched as the glass shattered and the white and blue liquid spilled over onto the floor. Black was coming, she just had to buy some time, as druids surged into the room and Lotor looked more and more unhinged by the second, his temper fracturing his otherwise handsome face.

"I'll use you to find my sister yet," he seethed, "wherever her miserable body rests—"

"How do you know she's not already working with me?" Allura bluffed, and then because the best lies had a grain of truth, she added, "I know she's alive. I freed her from a webum. If your mother's spells couldn't find me for 10,000 years, than how do you know Merla isn't hiding under one of mine right now?"

Lotor yelled and twelve druids held up their hands and sent blasts her way. Allura managed to dodge two, and side step a third, and she braced herself when she couldn't duck the next two. There was a heavy blow to her chest, knocking the air briefly out of her lungs, but none of the damage that should have occurred. No broken bits of her armour, or even anything that felt like she'd see a bruise once she inspected it. What the—?

The pink accents on her armour had turned black, the blue around her collar glowing, and—Her eyes filled with tears. Somehow, in some way, whether by love or magic or the quintessence Shiro and Black had once shared, imbued by her helmet, he was still protecting her from beyond the grave.

She would have smiled if it had been any other situation, but instead she looked at these druids—Haggar's servants, and ones who had experimented on him—and saw only enemies as she caught the next few blows and channelled them through her own body. "I am the last of the House of the Evening Star, of the Royal House of Morigin," she declared, "and you are no Alteans!" She pushed out her arms and the caught spells followed, blasting back and tossing a few of the druids into the air.

She was trying to conjure her own spell when Pidge and Hunk poked their heads through the doorway to the quintessence stores, fallen druids at their feet and their bayards drawn.

"Allura!" Pidge called, racing forwards. "Black is on her way!"

"So's Yellow," Hunk said, "and Green—uh, has your armour always been Black, and sparkly, or did we miss something?"

"No time to explain," she said, blasting at another druid on instinct. "Where are Keith and Lance?"

"They got Lira, and are heading outside of the Sanctuary now," Pidge said. "Blue and Red should be picking them up any moment."

"And no other alarms other than here in the dungeons have been sounded," Allura said, "because Lotor is a prat." He was currently fuming and trying to call for reinforcements, the alarm pad fried from when he had fired to sound just the ones in the dungeon. "Why, though? He said he had
"Oh, Hunk found that," Pidge said. "He noticed bombs rigged up according to the database's mainframe, so I rerouted that access energy to hear along the electrical wires, so—" Pidge gave her a devilish grin as Allura made the connection.

"This whole room is a bomb about to blow," she said, enthused, and gave them both admiring grins. "You two are geniuses."

"Can we get out of here now?" Hunk requested, and Allura nodded.

"Black should be here," she said, "in one—two—"

A gigantic metal muzzle broke through the walls, claws tearing the metal in two and countless cases of quintessence falling and shattering on the floor. Allura did let herself smile now, as they geared up their jetpacks and Black opened her mouth. Allura climbed inside, and then let Pidge and Hunk; they could reunite with their Lions once they were back at the Castle.

"Lance, Keith," she said, settling into her seat and flicking on the comm. "You've got your Lions and Lira?"

"Yes princess," Keith confirmed.

"We're taking off now," Lance said.

"Good." She watched Yellow and Green rise from the forest alongside Blue and Red from a little closer to the Wall, the cloaking fading. "Coran?" she said. They'd left him back at the Castle. "You have the particle barrier up?" She didn't know if Pollux had defensive ships around their immediate atmosphere, but now that Coran had moved closer for the pickup, they'd have to be ready for defense.

"In position princess," her advisor said. "Wormhole at the ready, it just needs you now."

She cranked Black up to full speed, the Lions following with Yellow bringing up the rear and only taking a few of the hits, and Allura had to let out a joyful whoop. They'd survived Pollux, kept Lira and Lotor safe, humiliated him, and ruined Pollux's quintessence stores. And they hadn't even had to form Voltron yet, but she knew in that moment she could. She was the Black Paladin of Voltron, and they could win this war. For Shiro. And for once, they'd won something without paying a high price. At least, for now.

The black accents from her suit faded once they reached the Castleship, and turning back to pink. So it was only temporary, to help soften blows. Interesting.

She got the wormhole ready, directing the Castleship through it as Pollux finally got its ships into fighter mode, but it was too late. They were home free.

She'd have to do more research on Altean alchemy once they got back to Olkarion, she thought, her smile faltering slightly. If Kolivan didn't kill them first.

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