Out on a mission to sway races to join the Coalition, the team finds a warrior culture that would make excellent fighters if they could be convinced to leave the Galra. But these people value Strength and think love is a weakness, which means Shiro and Allura have to behave themselves while they're planetside.

But there's more going on here than meets the eye. Are the Morashi really a good fit for the Coalition? And are there people out there with other agendas?

Notes

Week 1 of "Vote-A-Trope"! "Pretend NOT to be in a Relationship when they actually are" squeaked out a win by TWO VOTES, so here we go!

This actually started life as a bang fic for a bang I had to drop out of due to mental health reasons. v__v I'm glad it's gonna get to see the light of day. But only 1000 words or so of this was typed up before. Everything after that point is brand new.

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They were only three vargas out when Coran finally called them onto the bridge for the briefing. “What took so long?” Shiro asked.

“Well, our information is… a little out of date,” he reminded them all.

“By ‘a little,’ you mean ‘ten thousand years’ out of date?” Pidge chimed in.

Coran just cleared his throat. “Yes, well, getting current data was a bit tricky. And thank you for your help with that, Number Five.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, puffing out her chest before adding, “and stop calling me that.”

“You’re the Number One Hacker, for sure,” Hunk told her, patting her shoulder, and she beamed up at him with her lopsided smile.

“So, what did you find out?” Allura asked. “We have limited time to prepare as is.”

“Right, sorry, Princess.” Coran cleared his throat. He punched up some information on the screen. “These are the Morashi people. They were conquered by the Galra not very long ago, and, strangely enough, the Galra haven’t left a garrison on their planet.”

“Why not?” Keith asked, narrowing his eyes as if he could answer his own question by just staring at the data.

“They’ve signed a treaty,” Coran answered. “And their society is very structured around Honor.”

“Like ridiculously so,” Pidge put in. “From what I’ve found, they’re an extremely regimented culture. Concepts like ‘Honor’ and ‘Strength’ are so important that they kill or exile anyone found lacking.”

“Yikes.” Lance re-evaluated the people on the screen. “So, we’re calling this off, right? I mean, if honor’s so important to them, they’re not going to break their treaty with the Galra.”

Coran nodded. “Well, that’s just what the Galra think, which is why they haven’t bothered policing the place. Plus, this is a bit more on the fringes, and there’s not a lot out here the Galra want. If we can convince them that there’s no honor in the Galra or that we’re stronger than they are…”

“Which we are!” Lance declared, preening.

“…then they’ll drop their allegiance to the Galra entirely.”

“And this is some insane warrior culture they’ve got going on here,” Pidge told them all. “They’d be excellent fighters. It’s worth a shot.”

“They should respect Voltron’s strength, at least,” Allura suggested. “Do we have to give them some sort of show of force? Some demonstration of Voltron’s power?”

“Perhaps,” Coran said. “We won’t really know what will convince them until we talk to them.”
“We’ll all go down then,” she decided, “except for you, Coran. I want you up here, updating our data, compiling any information we get, and using it to help us figure out our next moves.”

“Yes, Princess.”

“This should be easy,” Lance said. “We go down there, show them we kick ass, tell them what losers the Galra are, and,” he snapped his fingers, “new allies!”

“We have to convince them the Galra are weaker than they thought,” Keith reminded him. “They’ll want proof. I doubt our word is going to be enough for them.”

“And one wrong step, and they might kill us,” Hunk put in.

Coran cleared his throat. “Well, if you’re all going down, there’s one more thing we might want to mention.” He looked at Shiro and Allura, standing next to each other as usual. “You two are going to have to behave yourselves.”

Pidge snickered, Lance scoffed, but Shiro and Allura both blushed and looked confused. “What do you mean ‘behave ourselves’?” Shiro asked.

“According to the information we have, ‘love’ is considered a weakness among the Morashi. They don’t even have marriage, necessarily; they form temporary family units for the purposes of procreation and child-rearing. Your relationship will be seen as a detriment, at best. Even if they don’t kill you, they won’t want to ally with us if they see…”

“…you two making moon eyes at each other,” Pidge finished.

“I do no such thing!” Allura declared hotly.

Shiro’s blush got worse, but at least he didn’t deny it. “I don’t see how this is going to be difficult. Our relationship has never interfered before.”

“We’ve never had to deal with a culture like this before,” Keith told him. “And you two can be a little… touchy-feely with each other.”

“What do you mean?” Allura asked, sounding defensive.

“You’re good at downplaying, but I don’t know if you two could hide it entirely.”

“Yeah, it is a little obvious,” Hunk observed. “Like, even if we didn’t know you two were together, it wouldn’t exactly be hard to figure out.”

“Hm,” Shiro mused. “Well, I can stay here. Allura can go down with you guys. That should solve the problem.”

“Yeah, but… if they respect strength so much, you should be there,” Lance said.

“You’re our leader,” Keith said. “It would be weird if you weren’t there.”

“And you and Hunk are the strongest paladins, physically,” Pidge pointed out. “What if they want some sort of demonstration?”

“Allura’s stronger than Hunk and I put together,” Shiro answered.

“We need you to form Voltron,” Hunk reminded him. “If they want to see what Voltron
can do, you’d have to be there.”

“And if you showed up belatedly, just for that demonstration, they’d wonder why we were ‘hiding’ you or keeping you back,” Allura commented with a heavy sigh. “Well, it honestly shouldn’t be that difficult. I don’t see what all the fuss is about. We’ll follow my original plan.”

There was a chorus of agreement. “We’d better get to it then. We don’t have much time to prepare,” Shiro told them. The other paladins headed out. Shiro watched them go and then exhaled. “This won’t be pleasant, but we can do it.”

“Of course we can,” Allura said nonchalantly. “It’s not as if we’re constantly pawing at each other or anything.”

“Not ‘constantly,’” Coran murmured. Shiro shot him a frown, and he shrugged. “I suppose I should leave you two alone for a bit?”

“Not necessary,” Allura said. She took Shiro’s hand. “We were just leaving anyway.”

“Were we?” he asked, the beginnings of a grin spreading onto his face.

“Well, we have just under three vargas,” she pointed out to him, tugging him towards the door. “And since I have to pretend not to love you for however long we’re down there, better to get some of that out of my system now.”

He cleared his throat as Coran snorted behind them, but he did not, of course, object.

The Lions of Voltron came down in perfect formation upon the designated landing field and let out a loud roar to announce their presence before lowering themselves and allowing their paladins – and Allura – to exit. Naturally, once they had done so, the Lions sat up again, looking proud and vigilant.

Allura walked up to the Morashi delegation there to greet them. She was wearing a variation of paladin armor, with more gilt edging on it. Something like what her father would have worn long ago, a symbol of rank as much as strength and protection. Her cape was a lighter blue, but otherwise it and her armor were much the same, just fitted to her.

There were three Morashi standing before them. There was no salute or acknowledgement until Allura stopped a few paces away from them.

“We greet you, Princess Allura of Altea,” they said in unison. All of their voices sounded a little growl-y, and when they smiled, their fangs were visible. But otherwise, they seemed perfectly pleasant. They, too, were in well-polished armor (though without capes); she didn’t doubt that their armor wasn’t as purely “ceremonial” as it might seem.

“I greet you, Councilors of Morash. I am accompanied by the Paladins of Voltron.” She stepped aside to indicate the five of them.

Shiro stepped forward to recite what she’d told him to say. “On behalf of the Paladins of Voltron, I greet you, Councilors of Morash.” It was better than trying to get all five of them to say it perfectly in unison.

Of course, the Morashi had no such problem. “We greet you, Paladins of Voltron.” And
then two of the councilors turned and simply walked off, leaving the third.

“I am Commander Wevel G’roknar, Badhi Temple, Military Councilor to the Honorable Morashi people,” they said. “I will lead you to the guest quarters.”

“Thank you, Commander,” she said as they began walking. “We are happy you’ve agreed to speak with us, despite your treaty with the Galra.”

“Our treaty does not say we cannot speak with whomever we wish. Though doubtless the Galra would prefer we turned you over to them.”

“You can try,” Keith muttered.

Shiro put a stop to that instantly. “Keith.”

But the commander just seemed amused. “Well, we shall see, won’t we? You will have half a varga to get settled and then you will all be expected at the Council building to make your case.”

They walked through the gate to the landing zone and were properly out in the urban sprawl. “Welcome to Nekkel, our capital city.”

And “sprawl” definitely seemed the term for it. Occasional buildings were two or three stories tall, but it seemed the Morashi definitely preferred to build out more than up. Small hovels were squeezed in wherever there was any space at all, aside from the clear roadways.

Allura didn’t get to see much of it as there were vehicles waiting for them. Wheeled conveyances, no top and not much for sides, either. You climbed straight up onto a bench and just held on, apparently. There didn’t even seem to be a driver.

Commander G’roknar went in first to sit up front, and Allura joined them on their bench. Shiro started towards her bench (there was room for one more), but then reconsidered and went to the bench behind hers.

This did not go unnoticed. “Is the Black Paladin of equal rank to you, Princess?”

“It depends on the situation,” she replied truthfully. “We often coordinate and plan together. Most typically, I am in charge of diplomatic situations – like this one – and he is the battle leader.”

“Ultimately,” Shiro spoke up from behind them, “I do defer to the Princess on most matters. The Lions are hers.”

“The Lions chose you and the other Paladins,” she reminded him. “The Lions are mine, but I must respect their choices.”

The commander grumbled. “Forgive me for saying so, Princess, but your chain of command is a bit ambiguous.”

“There is no forgiveness needed for the truth,” she replied.

“Princess Allura is not my equal,” Shiro insisted.

She shot him a Glare for that, and he just arched an eyebrow. *You and I are going to be discussing that later,* she promised him in her mind.
“There, see? Much clearer. Anyway, off we go.” They put their hand on a panel and the vehicle began moving, turning out into the crowded roadway and straight into traffic.

Her heart leapt when they were nearly crashed into by another “car,” but the commander didn’t even seem to notice. The vehicle quickly picked up speed.

“Uh, this is safe, isn’t it?” she heard Pidge ask.

“Just hang on,” Lance replied, “and Hunk? Try not to barf.”

“I make no promises,” and he already sounded a bit sick.

The vehicle lurched around corners and practically threw itself down streets. Other vehicles barely got out of the way in time. Allura’s adrenaline was racing, but she began to notice that this seemed to be how everyone here drove: you pointed yourself in the direction you wanted to go, and you went. It was up to everyone else to get out of your way.

Then they turned a little too hard, and she started to fly off the bench. There wasn’t much to hang on to, after all. She was afraid for a second that she’d end up on the street and run over by some other conveyance…

But then Shiro caught her. He had activated his hand and plunged it into the bench to anchor himself. He pulled her back up onto her bench and kept himself leaned forward the whole time, hand still caught in the bench, to make sure she wouldn’t have another close call like that. In her mind, she was thanking him fervently.

They finally stopped outside one of the rare two storey buildings. “Here we are!” the commander declared, hopping out of the car.

Allura looked back to make sure all the paladins were still with them. Keith and Pidge had activated their bayards: Keith had followed Shiro’s example, so he and Lance were both clinging to the sword; Pidge had used hers as a kind of seatbelt for Hunk, who seemed to have held onto her in return.

“What fun, eh?” the commander asked.

There was an answering chorus of groans as various paladin weapons – and Shiro’s hand – were retrieved and they all began descending.

“We are aware that many visitors prefer higher accommodations, which is understandable. You wish to survey your surroundings. Good strategy. So we have set aside a room on the top floor for you.”

“A room?” Shiro asked.

“Well, for the team,” the commander told him. “Naturally, Princess Allura has a room to herself.”

“Naturally,” she agreed, though she’d rather have been in the same room as the paladins.

Commander G’roknar stopped at the door. “The slaves will show you to your quarters. I will see you in half a varga at the Council building.”

If the commander noticed all six of their heads pivoting to them at the word “slaves,” they didn’t show it. They just hummed happily, jumped back into the vehicle, and roared away again.
Allura looked to Shiro and the paladins. “We didn’t know about that.”

“Maybe it’s… a translation error? Cultural misunderstanding?” Lance asked weakly.

The door opened and someone who didn’t look Morashi at all bowed. “Welcome to the Council’s Guest Quarters. I will show you to your room.” Their voice was small, barely audible.

They shared a look amongst themselves. Allura smiled at her. “Thank you, that would be very nice. What’s your name?”

“Unimportant to you, Princess,” they said.

“Of course it’s important to me,” she assured them.

“I do not have a name any longer, but once I was Meine, daughter of Pio. You should not concern yourself, Princess.”

Allura could feel herself bristling, but she swallowed that for the time being. “It’s nice to meet you, Meine, daughter of Pio. Can I call you ‘Meine’?”

“You can call me whatever you wish.” She led them up the stairs.

“How long have you… worked here?”

“Many years. I am quite knowledgeable but if you wish another slave instead…”

“No, I’m sure you’ll do fine, Meine. Did you… work anywhere else before this?”

“Not in Morash, no. Here is your room, Princess.” She stopped outside a door. “I will be at your beck and call any time you require assistance for anything. There is the Paladins’ room.” She gestured to another door with another slave of a similar race standing outside it.

They stepped forward. “I am here to assist the Paladins.”

“And what’s your name?” Shiro asked. “And yes, it’s important to us.”

They glanced over at Meine who seemed to nod a little, and then replied, “I was Duerm, son of Quet.”

“So we can call you ‘Duerm’?”

“If that is your wish.”

Shiro looked back to her. She could see her own discomfort mirrored back to her in his eyes. “Thank you, Meine and Duerm, but we have very little time until we are expected at the Council building.”

“A conveyance and driver have been made ready for you all,” Duerm said.

“Can’t we walk?” Hunk asked weakly.

“I’m not sure it’s safe to,” Pidge replied. “We’d probably be mowed down.”

“May we have some time to ourselves until then?” Allura interrupted. She didn’t want the paladins to get going on the topic (and she didn’t really want to think about getting back into such a vehicle right this second).
“Of course,” they said in unison. They both bowed and then walked away, heading back downstairs.

“The Morashi take slaves from other races?” Keith asked. “I’m not sure I like this.”

“They probably view those other races as weak and inferior,” Pidge reminded them. “This is what they’re like.”

“Do we really want to ally with these people if they believe slavery is permissible because they’re strong enough to do it?” Shiro asked sternly.

Allura sighed. “We’re here now. We might as well go to the talks.”

“Y’know,” Hunk mused, “maybe it’s the Galra’s fault.”

“What do you mean?” Lance asked him.

“Well, the Galra enslave weaker races, right? The whole reason the Morashi agreed to join the Galra was because the Galra were so strong. Maybe the Morashi are just doing what they do. So, if we prove ourselves stronger, maybe they’ll stop the enslavement and do what we do instead.”

“Worth a shot,” Shiro agreed. “If nothing else, if we prove ourselves stronger than the Galra, we can make the release of their slaves a condition of the alliance.”

Allura nodded. “We have to try a peaceful solution first. But I will not leave people enslaved here.”

Shiro put a hand on her shoulder. “We won’t, either. You know that.”

Keith cleared his throat. “Careful.”

Shiro dropped his hand. “Oh, honestly, there is nothing romantic about that!”

“You were getting that soft look on your face again,” Lance told him.

“What ‘soft look’? I don’t…”

“Yes, you do,” Allura said at the same time all the other paladins did. They laughed at that.

“Okay, let’s get ourselves used to our rooms,” Shiro said rather than continue to deny it.

Pidge was way ahead of him, peering into their designated room. “Hey, bunk beds!”

“I CALL TOP BUNK!” Lance and Keith said at the same time before glaring at each other.

“There are three bunk beds in here,” she told them. “You can each have a top bunk.”

Allura went into her room. The bed was only big enough for one person and the furniture was sparse, but everything was of very high quality: polished hardwoods, soft blankets. “I guess I don’t get a bunk bed,” she mock-pouted.

“No, but it’s nice,” Shiro agreed.

“And you won’t be able to sneak in here to spend the night,” she warned him in a whisper. “Bed’s too small for that nonsense.”
He grinned at her. “We’ve been in more cramped quarters before.”

“Behave yourself.”

“You first.”

“Shiro, you want top or bottom bunk?” Hunk called from the hallway.

There were the sounds of Lance and Keith arguing over which top bunk each wanted and, over that, Pidge suggesting, “If we weren’t in Morash, I’d tell you two to kiss and get it over with.”

Shiro shook his head in amusement. “We’ll catch up with you downstairs. Take some time to rest while you still can.”

She chuckled. “I’d bid you the same, but it sounds like you’ll be busy.”

“As always.” And he jogged out of her room, already calling out, “That’s enough! From ALL of you!”

A hooded figure peered out of a hovel across the road from the Guest Quarters. This visit might be their only chance. It was just a matter of waiting for the right time.

~End of Chapter 1~
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

WAIT FUCK NO I forgot to mark that this fic has multiple chapters. my bad.

Sorry y'all had to wait an extra week for this. It's so weird to me to have to write chapters in order to meet deadline. @__@ I'm used to having a story either done or mostly done before I start posting it. But then that's the point of this experiment.

“Let Allura take point,” Shiro told the others. “Don’t speak unless your opinion is asked for, but be honest when it is.”

“Does that mean I can duct tape Keith’s mouth shut?” Lance asked excitedly.

“Do you have any duct tape with you?” Pidge asked him.

“I think I might have some in Goldie…” Hunk mused.

“Knock it off,” Shiro warned. “No duct taping.” He jogged ahead to get the door for Allura.

“Shiro,” Keith hissed at him.

“She’s the Princess,” he hissed back.

“You and I are having a discussion about rank when this is over,” Allura warned him as she walked in.

The interior of the Council building had very little décor to it. There were large statues of heroes and legends (she assumed) acting as pillars, and the materials it was built with were very nice, but clearly “opulence” was yet another weakness to the Morashi.

She cast about for signs of more slaves, but everyone they came across seemed to be Morashi of some importance. Greetings were curt and civil, and no one seemed willing to speak with them for now.

A loud gong sounded and, with no further explanation, everyone began filing towards the open doors of what she assumed was the Council chamber. She followed suit, hoping that where they were to go after that would be obvious. The paladins, of course, fell in behind her.

She expected a table to sit around, or maybe rows of seats addressing a podium. Instead, they walked into what looked like an arena or coliseum. Directly opposite the door they’d entered from were three impressive seats. Well, impressive in the sense that they were full chairs and not...
the benches. She glanced over at Shiro.

He was impassive, seemingly unconcerned and uncaring about the fact that, as the Morashi were taking seats on long benches, they were clearly expected to descend the stairs into the arena. He was a blank wall, staring straight ahead, and that worried her.

She so badly wanted to take his hand, squeeze it reassuringly, smile to let him know she was here and she wouldn’t let anything happen to him. Instead, she led the way down.

“I don’t like this,” she heard Hunk whimper.

“Shh. Just look impressive,” Lance told him, “and, y’know, not scared.”

“Easy for you to say.”

She tried to listen to the background chatter from the Morashi, but most of it seemed to be pleasantries, as if they were gathered for entertainment, not diplomacy. She was vaguely insulted, but also worried. She didn’t let it show, of course.

She stopped in the center of the arena and could hear the paladins fan out behind her. She knew Shiro was immediately behind her; she was used to the feel of him at her back.

The talking cut off as the Councilors emerged and took their seats. There was no announcement, no pomp or ceremony. As they came out, she recognized G’roknar; the others were the same two who had been at the landing field earlier. She’d been right in that, at least. Once the three Councilors were seated, Commander G’roknar began speaking, looking down at her.

“You have come here to request we break our treaty – sworn in honor – to the Galra.” It sounded like an accusation. It was also a far cry from the fun-loving recklessness he’d had when driving. There was nothing friendly in his tone.

“Individual Galra may have honor, but the Empire does not,” she replied.

“They are strong,” one of the other Councilors said. “Worthy combatants who value strength.”

“They value their own power, not anyone else’s.”

“Whether the Empire has honor or not has no bearing on our honor,” the third countered. “We should stay true to our word.”

“The Empire will only value your treaty so long as it is useful for them to do so. Then they will seek to weaken and enslave you.” She used “enslave” deliberately, to see if they reacted to it at all.

They did not, except to scoff. “Impossible. We are too strong to be enslaved,” the second Councilor insisted.

“Yes, we do wish to see this Voltron,” G’roknar mused. “A demonstration would be welcome. Tomorrow, perhaps?”

She nodded. “That would be fine.”
“First, of course,” the third Councilor said, “we must see your own strength.”

“Is that why we are in this arena?” she demanded immediately.

“Naturally.”

“There are other ways to demonstrate strength,” Shiro spoke up from behind her.

“This is the way we choose,” G’roknar told him.

Her heart ached. She didn’t want to put Shiro through something like this again. “And if we choose not to play your games?”

They scoffed. “Then we are done listening to you.”

She was going to protest, but Shiro spoke before she could. “Very well.”

A cheer went up and she turned to him, whispering, “Are you sure? I can think of something.”

“Let’s just get it over with. Guys.” He waved the paladins over into a huddle. “We don’t know what we’ll be fighting, but no killing unless you have to.”

They nodded. Allura looked back up to the Councilors. “Send in our opponents.” She could hear the sounds of bayards being summoned.

A door slammed shut behind them, preventing them from reaching the stairs. Hidden doors in the sides of the arena walls started to slide open. ‘Circle up!” Shiro yelled. Everyone did so; Allura had Shiro on her right and Lance on her left.

Large canid-looking beasts bounded out as soon as there was room for them. They were at least as tall as Keith at the shoulder. They were snarling as they leaped for them. Allura wasn’t in a good position to get at one, but Shiro grabbed his and threw it back to the ground. There was a yelp as Lance tagged one in the forelimb, but after that, she couldn’t pay attention to individual goings-on.

Because after the beasts came a wave of armed Morashi warriors. None of them seemed to have firearms, at least. That was when Allura realized she didn’t have a weapon. She hadn’t brought her staff with her here.

Shiro swung his elbow into the side of a Morashi’s face. “Princess!” He grabbed her hand and brought it near his thigh armor. And just like that…

She didn’t have time to be surprised. The Black Bayard became a staff in her hands, and she brought it up in front of her as a beast lunged at her. It fixed its mouth on the staff and chomped down on it. She could get it off if she could move, but she was in her dress, not her suit. It hampered her movements.

She didn’t even have to ask; she heard the sound of Shiro’s hand glowing into life and then with a murmured, “Sorry about this,” she felt her skirt loosen. He’d sliced a large cut in it, nearly up to her hip. His hand deactivated as he kicked an oncoming warrior in the face.

She grinned and kicked the wolf away. It went skidding across the arena floor and thumped against the far wall. The crowd seemed to like that.

She dodged a warrior’s sword and dropped to trip them. “Shiro, JUMP!” and he did just as
she followed-through with her staff swing, knocking two more Morashi onto their backs. She got up and stabbed at the side of a beast going after Pidge, getting it right behind its foreleg. It yelped a little and backed off.

A warrior got their arm around her throat, but she dropped the bayard so she could reach back, grab hold, and throw them over her head. They landed on a beast and Pidge zapped them until they were unconscious.

“DUCK!”

Allura dropped as a rifle blast went over her head, picking up the bayard-staff while she was down there. “Thank you, Lance.”

“You got it, Princess.”

Hunk had stopped using his bayard at all, going for punches and elbow drops. Keith’s sword flowed from one hand to the other to use in countering other weapons, but mostly he seemed to be directing those coming at him into the path of Lance or Pidge.

Then she heard Shiro’s hand activate again and she whirled towards the sound. His glowing hand was flat as a blade and, at that height, would slice open the throat of the Morashi facing him.

Allura rushed in and knocked the Morashi down, pinning him with her staff at his throat. “Yield,” she demanded.

But he couldn’t respond. G’roknar’s voice rang out. “Will you kill them?”

The arena was full of warriors and beasts, some bleeding, none able to stand. Allura couldn’t help noticing that the ones nearest to Shiro were fully unconscious, and probably in sore need of medical attention.

“We will not.”

“You should slay your enemies,” the second Councilor said.

“And we could, if we chose to. You chose this game, but we choose how to play it. The Morashi are not our enemies.”

The three Councilors looked amongst themselves and they were grinning in approval when they looked back to her. “Well done, Princess.”

She got up off of the pinned warrior as the crowd cheered. She released the staff and the Black Bayard flowed back to its storage in the Black Paladin armor. The Councilors were now yelling to the audience, “We shall have a feast tonight for our guests!”

She turned to Shiro immediately. His hand was still activated and he looked… angry. His chest heaved and he seemed to be casting about for another enemy. His eyes were lost to rage.

“Takashi,” she said quietly, moving into his line of sight. “Takashi, do you know me?”

His gaze locked on hers and, for just a tick, she was facing the Champion of the Galra Arena. But then he blinked and shook his head a little. The hand lost its lethal glow. “Allura? Why are you here?” His eyes began to widen in panic.

“I’m okay, we’re okay. Everyone’s okay. We’re in Morash, remember? Trying to make an
alliance?"

He looked around. “Oh. O-oh. I…”

“It’s okay. Let’s just get back to the guest quarters.” She approached the stairs and, as hoped, the door slid open for them. She walked regally up them, ignoring the slit in her skirt and the enthusiasm of the crowd.

“Good job!” someone said.

“Well fought!”

“So fierce.” That voice was sly, hungry, and it drew Allura’s attention. The owner of that voice was, of course, looking at Shiro.

She glared at them as she passed, but they seemed unconcerned.

As they came out of the Council chamber, she shared a worried look with Keith. Shiro was… still. He moved when everyone else did, but he was withdrawn, quiet, like he was made of stone. This was worse than when they’d first come in; that had been a mask, but this… This went deeper.

They walked back out to their awaiting vehicle. “Back to the guest quarters, please,” she told the driver. And this time, she and Keith had to keep Shiro in his seat. He was just staring ahead, unresponsive, as if he were in some sort of walking coma.

She was anxious to get him alone where they could talk and she could comfort him, but when they arrived at their lodgings, there was a hooded figure awaiting them. “Princess and Paladins of Voltron, I must speak with you.”

“This isn’t a good time,” Keith told them.

“There is no other time. Th- …” They stopped. “The Black one is past-gazing, isn’t he?”

“Past-gazing?” Pidge asked.

“Looking back at things that happened long ago but have not faded.”

“And if he is?” Allura asked defensively. She worried that this would be seen as some sort of weakness as well. *This man has fought his way through terrors of the real world as well as those of his mind. Anyone who calls him weak doesn’t know the first thing about him.*

The hooded figure shook its head. “I will come back. After the feast. You will all be tired then, but I must speak to you. Do not drink too much *mogrul*; the Black one should abstain entirely. I will return.” And they ran off.

“I’m not sure I like what’s going on here,” Hunk said.

“Let’s just get Shiro inside.”

“I’m fine,” he said unsteadily.

“You will be,” Allura told him. “Come on.”

Meine and Duerm were awaiting them just inside the door. “Welcome back. We hope all went well,” Meine said quietly.
“More or less,” Keith muttered darkly.

“They said there’s going to be a feast?” Lance mentioned.

“Oh, then you have done very well,” Duerm told them. “I would offer congratulations if it were my place to do so.”

“No, no, congratulate away.” Lance was preening.

“What time will the feast be, do you know?” Keith pressed.

“You will have a few vargas yet,” Duerm answered.

“We will come to you when it is time to get ready,” Meine promised. “Is there anything you need in the meantime?”

“Water,” Allura said. “And rest. Thank you.” She headed for the stairs and was relieved to see Shiro following her.

“And maybe a light snack?” Hunk added.

“Hunk, we’re going to have a feast!” Lance said.

“Hey, fighting works up an appetite!”

“We will bring you something to eat,” Duerm said. He and Meine left.

Allura headed for her room until she felt a hand on her shoulder. She stopped in the hallway and turned back. “Shiro?” She had thought he’d just follow her in there.

He pulled her into his arms and held onto her like a drowning man with a life preserver. “You’re okay?”

She shifted to be just a little taller than he was, arms a little bigger, then wrapped those arms around him in return. “I’m fine.”

He exhaled in relief.

“Shiro…” That was Keith’s voice, and she supposed he was warning them, but he didn’t sound like he liked it this time.

Shiro let go of her to turn to him. “Keith. You okay?”

“I’m okay. We’re all okay.”

“We’re just worried about you,” Pidge said as she arrived.

Shiro forced a smile; Allura could tell it wasn’t reaching his eyes. “I’m sorry. But it’s okay now.”

“You sure, Shiro?” Lance asked.
“Absolutely.”

“She stepped forward and laid a gentle hand on his arm to get his attention. “If you need something, anything, say so. We have vargas yet until the feast, and we’re alone here, aside from the servants.”

He shook his head. “Water, some food, and some rest will be fine. We need to get through the feast and talk to… whoever that was outside.”

She frowned and let herself return to her true size. “If you change your mind, I’ll be in my room. And you’ll have the team with you in yours.”

“It’s okay to let us know what you need,” Keith reminded him.

“I’m fine, guys. Thanks. Let’s enjoy our downtime while we’ve got it.” He headed for the paladins’ room.

Allura shared another worried look with Keith. But this wasn’t the time or place to try to wear him down further.

Keith followed him into their room; she knew he’d keep an eye on him. The others half-smiled or gave little waves at her before following.

She went into her own room and stretched out on the bed, intending to think about things. She was asleep before she knew it, lost in a dream of a peaceful universe where none of them had to fight ever again.

~End of Chapter 2~
Mogrul isn't really alcoholic, per se. You'll see. It gets explained. So please don't complain to me about underage drinking. Also, they're on another planet.

The feast hall was massive, the entire building literally nothing but one huge room (aside from scattered bathrooms around the perimeter). There were open, well-lit areas for dining, dancing, and what seemed to be spontaneous brawling. Couches and lounges sprawled in the shadowy patches in and among these circles of activity, to allow some brief rest, or to just sit and watch what was going on elsewhere. There were musicians playing near the dance floor, but their music wafted through the hall.

As soon as Allura and the Paladins entered, they were the instant center of attention and applause. There were calls for Shiro and Keith to come join in the brawling, shouted requests for dances with any of them. Everyone looked to Allura.

She shrugged. “Your time is your own. I trust you all to take care of yourselves, but please be careful.”

Lance darted off to take up a Morashi lady on her offer of a dance. Keith gave Allura a long look before he headed over to the fight rings. Hunk made a beeline for the dining table. Pidge considered her options, decided, “Food first,” and followed him.

Allura looked up at Shiro. “How are you feeling?”

He was quiet a moment, considering. He wanted to be anywhere but here right now. No, that wasn’t strictly true. He wanted to be alone with Allura or with the team. Just relaxing, thinking about anything and everything except the Arena. He wanted to get in touch with his humanity again. He didn’t want to be a Paladin right now.

But she needed him to be, so he was holding it together. The jagged edges of the world were smoothing out, just not as quickly as he would have liked, given what they were facing here.

He smiled. “I’m starved. You?”

She wasn’t buying the smile. “It seems the Councilors are at dinner just now, so I was going to start there.”

He started to offer her his arm to escort her. He turned the motion into an abrupt stretch. “After you, Princess.”

She shot him a worried look but walked off ahead of him, and he dutifully trailed after her. Ugh. I’m trying to get myself re-anchored in reality, but I can’t even behave normally.

His eyes darted around the revelry. People raising their mugs and glasses to him, cheering. Shouting accolades at his ferocity. Their faces flashed into Galra faces, back into Morashi. He shook his head a little to try to clear it and refocused his eyes on Allura.
And then someone yelled, “What a champion!”

Shiro whirled towards the voice. He couldn’t make out who had said it; there was a crowd of cheering and laughing people. So pleased with his violence and rage, were they? They hadn’t seen anything yet.

Firm hands took hold of his arm. And then a whispered, “Takashi.”

He jolted out of it. Everything was the same. Everything was different. He looked down at his hand and deactivated it. He turned to face her.

“I’m sorry. I… I shouldn’t be here right now.”

“You need to eat, if nothing else. And avoid the drink.” She tugged him back into walking.

He started moving again on his own, and she released him to walk with her through the crowd. “We’re trusting the word of a hooded stranger?” he asked quietly. To be fair, he would have avoided anything that might be alcoholic anyway. Not while they were on a mission, and not when he was still coming down out of… this.

“They said it out of concern for your trauma.”

“Maybe there’s some other reason they don’t want us to drink the… what was it?”

“Mogrul. And they only said you shouldn’t drink it; they just suggested the rest of us not drink so much. We have to be sober when we talk to them later.”

He grumbled. “Well, I was planning on having water anyway.”

“Good Paladin.” She patted his head condescendingly and laughed as she moved ahead of him.

He just rolled his eyes and shook his head and then tried to look anywhere else before someone could catch him giving her that “soft look” or whatever. He was fond of the little jokes and games they played, happy to find moments where they didn’t have to be in charge of anything and could lighten up a bit.

But not here. Not surrounded by Morashi.

He hung back to observe. It seemed to be buffet style, with servants – slaves, he corrected himself with a frown – bringing out more and more heaping platters full of exotic dishes. There were tables with place settings ready, and as people arose, slaves came out to clear the dirty dishes away and replace them with clean ones.

He watched Allura chatting up one of the Councilors and headed for the buffet. He had to stop himself from getting two plates; what would it look like if he brought her food? Consideration for a superior rank or would that be read as too cozy? What the hell is wrong with being in love, dammit?! He’d never felt as strong as when Allura was at his side.

He served himself only, with the mental justification that he wasn’t sure what she’d want to eat from these offerings anyway. He wasn’t really sure what he wanted. He went by his nose more than his eyes, though both the sights and scents of the food on display were reminding him that he really was hungry. He got a bowl of some kind of soup that reminded him of osuimono and then added lots of small servings of various different options. If there was something he really liked, he could come back for more, after all.
One of the Councilors was seated, eating daintily from the rather high-piled plate in front of them. He decided that the sooner negotiations were settled, the sooner they could leave. He had a sparkling vision in his mind of this planet vanishing behind them as he flipped Morash off with one hand and held Allura close to him with the other, kissing her deeply.

With this mental paradise to guide him, he was able to walk over and take the seat next to the Councilor. Normally he would have been polite and asked first, but for all he knew, politeness was also weak. “Councilor,” he said as he set his plate down.

“Ah, Black Paladin! So good to meet you at last! I am High Priest Korix Vanorr, Fordan Temple, Religious Councilor to the Honorable Morashi people.”

Quiznak. “Uh, I greet you, Councilor of Morash.”

She smiled. “You have already greeted me. Don’t be so stiff! You have proved your strength admirably and well today, Paladin!”

A slave came around with a pitcher. The Councilor raised her glass to have it refilled. It was a deep amber color and Shiro could smell it from here. When the slave wordlessly offered the pitcher, he shook his head. “Water, please.” The slave nodded and left.

“What, no celebratory mogrul?”

Shiro shrugged. “I prefer not to dull my senses.”

“Oh, but mogrul does no such thing! It is an enhancer.”

“Of…?” he asked warily.

Councilor Vanorr laughed. “Everything!” They drank deep.

“I think I’ve proven myself strong enough without it,” Shiro said. A glass of water appeared for him. He turned and thanked them.

Vanorr snorted. “You don’t have to do that. Thank the slaves, that is. It’s their job.”

“Just my way. I know it’s not yours.”

The Councilor slapped him on the back heartily. “True enough. And if nothing else, it shows good situational awareness.”

“Thank you.” He sipped the water and started in on his food. Keeping up conversation with the Councilor wasn’t hard; she was very chatty. He wasn’t sure if that was the booze or her normal behavior. Possibly both. That stuff is supposedly an ‘enhancer,’ after all.

When he wasn’t chatting, he was either eating – the Morashi seemed to like spicy (or very strongly-flavored) foods – or keeping an eye on Allura, chatting away with the other two Councilors. She seemed to be having a good time, holding a glass of mogrul and smiling widely. At one point, her stomach must have growled, because she clapped a hand over her stomach and the Councilors laughed and gestured her towards the buffet table.

Good, she’ll finally get something to eat. But Councilor Vanorr was asking him something about Voltron, so he broke his attention away to answer her.

“Well, actually, piloting any of the Lions isn’t so much a matter of physical strength as …
emotional strength, I suppose?” he mused. “You have to bond with your Lion, and the stronger that bond is, the more powerful you both become.” He hated phrasing it in those terms, and he didn’t consider it exactly correct, but he had to tweak it for his audience, after all.

And she seemed to like it. “So you and your Lion must be very powerful by now.”

“My bond with the Black Lion is strong,” he agreed.

“And the Black Lion must be the strongest, since it is the largest?”

Shiro cleared his throat. “The Black Lion has to be the largest because it is the head and torso of Voltron. It also takes the most energy to pilot…”

“Thus that fierce energy you showed in the arena earlier!” Ugh, don’t remind me. “It’s no wonder the biggest Lion is yours! Did you have to fight the others to win it? I’m sure it was easy for you.”

“Uh, no, there was no fighting. The Lions choose their paladins based on… well, a commonality of spirit, I suppose.”

“Ah! Like comrades in arms! Blood brothers bound together in battle!”

“Something like that.”

“Truly, you are the strongest of the Paladins in all ways!”

He opened his mouth to answer, but was cut off by a, “Ohhhh, you have NO idea.”

Shiro blinked and looked over as Allura sat down on his other side. She had three or four piles of foodstuffs – he recognized some of them as being supremely spicy and wondered if he should warn her – and she set her plate and glass down so hard that he thought she’d break them.

“Shiro is just… he’s just STRONG. LOOK AT HIM.” She poked him in the arm, just above his prosthetic.

The Councilor was enthusiastic. “Ah, Princess! I was hoping we’d be able to chat! You also fought very well today! I know klysop commanders who would envy your skills!”

Allura giggled. “Thank you, Councilor! It’s so good of you to say!”

Shiro side-eyed her and then glanced to her mogrul glass. No sooner had he realized it was nearly empty than it was refilled for her.

“Uh, Princess…”

She just spoke over him. “So, I hope Shiro’s been telling you about our victory over the Galra at Henlop-5! That was a particularly thrilling battle.”

“No, he hadn’t gotten to it!”

Shiro just leaned back to stay out of the way of the conversation, finish eating, and keep an eye on Allura. When she wasn’t talking, she was eating – and drinking – with gusto. He tried to keep the…servers from refilling her glass, but they seemed to pay him no mind when it came to other peoples’ drinks. Which I would normally understand and appreciate, but…

The others wandered in and out of the dining area, and all of them turned down the mogrul entirely, except for Hunk, who declared it an excellent aperitif and sipped it along with his
little-bit-of-everything meal.

Shiro would have liked to be anywhere else, honestly, but he didn’t want to leave Allura alone. He caught Keith’s eye when he came over to grab some random item off the table to munch on.

Keith arched an eyebrow.

Shiro gave the barest nod of his head towards Allura, who was laughing loudly at one of the Councilor’s jokes.

Keith’s eyebrows both went up. He popped the rest of the food item in his mouth. By the time he’d reached the princess’s spot at the table, he’d chewed and swallowed it.

“Hey, Princess, do you want to dance?”

She looked up at him. “I do, actually! But not with you. Sorry, Keith. Shiro!” She latched onto his arm. “Come dance with me.” She was already tugging him out of his seat.

She was stronger than he was. That wasn’t anything new. But she seemed a lot stronger all of a sudden. Maybe it was just that she wasn’t accepting his attempts to remain seated and was exerting herself more? Whatever it was, she hauled him out of the chair and started dragging him towards the dance floor.

“Allura,” he protested, “You’ve had a lot to drink. Maybe we should get back to the guest lodge.”

She stopped pulling him, but his relief was short-lived. She swooped in and pressed herself against him, pouting up at him wide-eyed. “But I want to dance, Takashi.”

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He cleared his throat and pushed her gently away – or, rather, put his hands on his arms and pushed himself away from her. “Remember where we are.”

“We’re at a party being held in our honor, and we should dance!” She latched onto a hand and started pulling again.

“One dance, and then we’ll go,” he said.

“One dance isn’t enough!” She was heading straight for the center of the floor, which was no mean feat. The gathered Morashi were all dancing in close quarters with each other to a very loud and upbeat song. The singer would occasionally roar something and the crowd would roar back. It was like an old-fashioned rave, only much brighter lit.

He tried to pull back, putting some effort into resisting. It didn’t matter, and she paid him no mind. She didn’t stop until they were dead center and then she pushed herself against him again. “Come on, dance.” She was shimmying to the music.

Any other place and time… Her body undulated against his and he swallowed hard.

“Allura, we should go. You’ve had too much to drink.”

“I feel fine. But I miss you.” She looped her arms around his neck. “I just want to have fun with my…”

He clapped a hand over her mouth and glanced around, but if anyone else had heard that, they didn’t seem to be paying it any mind. “Paladin,” he finished for her, trying to bore the
warning into her pretty eyes. “I’ve had lots of fun tonight. We all have.”

He slowly moved his hand away. She smirked at him. “We could have a lot more fun.”

He sighed. “Princess. That would be improper.”

She giggled at him and leaned closer. “You didn’t used to think so.”

He blushed, glancing around for any onlookers. They still seemed to be ignoring them, but he wasn’t sure he could trust that.

She tried to pull Shiro’s head down. “Come here; give me a kiss.”

“Allura, not here!” He tried to free himself from her grip, but her strength was too much for him.

And then, all of a sudden, Lance appeared out of the crowd. “Princess! Dance with me!”

She looked over her shoulder at him and pouted. “I want to dance with Takashi.”

“Eh, he’s being a stick in the mud,” Lance scoffed. “You wanna dance, then you wanna Lance!” He grinned.

She snorted and released Shiro. “One dance and you watch your hands.”

“I am nothing if not a gentleman. Now let’s see some hip action, Princess.” Lance caught his eye and nodded.

Shiro understood. It was a rescue op. He sighed in relief and fled the dance floor.

Keith was waiting for him at the edge of it. “How much has she had?”

“At least four glasses.” Shiro groaned. “They just kept refilling it.”

“It’s a very interesting substance,” Pidge said. “I’ve been analyzing it with my portable scanner. It’s not typical alcohol.”

“The Councilor said it was an ‘enhancer’?” he supplied.

“That’s about in line with what I’m seeing. It amplifies your body’s natural reactions.”

“Which is why Allura was draped all over you out there,” Keith summed up. “I sent Lance in to wear her out.”

“Thank you for that,” Shiro said gratefully. “She was killing me.”

“And that ‘enhancement’ is probably why our hooded friend suggested you not drink any,” Pidge added. “It would amplify your lingering traumatic reactions.”

He remembered how he’d been about to swing on someone as soon as they arrived. The thought of that sort of behavior being amplified… He felt a cold chill go down his spine. “We should get back and find out more about that person and what they want our help with.”

“Let Lance wear Allura out a bit,” Keith suggested. “Once she gets even a little tired, she should be very tired as the mogrul starts enhancing that.”

“Good point. How’d your fight go?”
“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” he replied with a grin. “They’d love to have you over in one of the rings.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. But I don’t think I can handle that tonight.”

“Don’t blame you. I pretended to be Lance and talked a big game in front of them about how you didn’t want to kick the entire country’s asses all at once.”

“KEITH.”

Pidge was snickering. “It seems to have worked though.”

“Come on, we’ll go sit for a bit,” Keith said. “I see room enough for us to sit together over here.”

He followed Keith towards the couches. “You find anything else interesting, Pidge?”

“Just listening to the crowd, there’s a pretty strong 50/40 split in allying with us.” They sat down as she continued, “The Galra put on an impressive performance, too, after all, and breaking the existing treaty is a pretty big sticking point.”

“50/40?” Keith asked. “Which one’s the 50?”

“And what’s the other 10?” Shiro followed up.

“The 50 is rejecting our alliance; the 40 is breaking the Galra treaty to ally with us. But the other 10% are Morashi wanting to see if joint alliance is a thing.”

“Basically turning themselves into a neutral party who gets the benefits of both sides?”

Pidge nodded. “Which isn’t a bad play, if it weren’t for the fact that the Galra Empire is… well, the Galra Empire.”

“Yeah, I don’t think they get ‘neutral,’” Keith muttered.

Hunk showed up with another plate of food. “Hey, desserts’re coming out.”

“Oh, cool.” Keith got up to head in that direction.

“I don’t want to eat,” Shiro groaned. “No more.”

“Are the desserts sweet or are they all still spicy?” Pidge asked warily.

Hunk offered a small cube to her. “See for yourself.”

She studied him for a long moment, then took the cube and popped it in her mouth. She chewed and then nearly gagged. “What the…?!”

“It’s spicy?” Shiro guessed.

She shook her head. “Ah nee mihk…”

“Here, take a shot of mogrul,” Hunk offered.

She recoiled.

“ONE drink. It won’t mess with you too much and it’ll clear it out.”
Pidge gave in and accepted the glass as Hunk turned to Shiro. “They’re rich desserts. Real thick and very sweet. They honestly overdo all their flavorings, but I think that if you toned some of them down a bit, they’d be amazing! The basic recipes are fantastic, really, with some superb flavor profiles!”

Pidge made a face and gave the glass back to Hunk. “You know, I’d ask for something bland, but they’d probably overdo the blandness, too. Does everything have to be loud and in your face?”

Keith wandered back over, chewing on something. Hunk offered the glass to him, but he shook his head and seemed perfectly normal as he sat back down. Shiro cast his eyes over the dance floor, but he couldn’t make out Allura or Lance. He stood from his seat to try to get a better view.

“Shiro, she’s fine,” Pidge sighed.

And then Hunk said, “Oh, she’s coming over.”

Shiro turned just in time to see Allura stumble. He ran over to catch her before she hit the floor.

“Sorry, Shiro!” Lance was catching up. “She got away from me in the crowd.”

“It’s okay, Lance. You did a good job.” He bent to pick her up. “Let’s just get out of here. We have someone to meet.”

“Uh, should we be talking to that person when Allura’s clearly unconscious?” Hunk asked.

“We don’t have a choice,” Shiro said, heading for the exit.

The Morashi they passed were clearly impressed by Allura being unconscious, or else they were still cheering the fact that Shiro had nearly descended into a bloodthirsty rage.

*I hate it here. I hope whoever we’re going to meet has something good to tell us.*

~End of Chapter 3~
He kept her on his lap and in his arms through the car ride back, cradling her close with his left arm while his right kept them both from flying off. He might have worried about all the holes he was putting in the Morashi vehicles if it weren’t the only way to ensure they didn’t lose anyone. If any of the others had similar misgivings, they weren’t showing them.

When they pulled up at the guest lodgings, he didn’t see anyone. It was fully night now, so that wasn’t a surprise. Still, Shiro’d already had a hell of a night, and he wasn’t in the mood to take chances.

He passed Allura to Hunk carefully and took point as they approached the door. The car took off behind them. Keith already had his bayard in hand; the others looked ready to summon theirs at a moment’s notice.

As they neared the door, a strange voice tsked from somewhere in the shadows off to their right. “She had too much to drink.”

Shiro couldn’t quite place the voice, but then he’d been pretty out of it the first time the stranger had approached them. “They kept refilling her glass,” he said, trying to keep his tone steady. “I don’t think she even noticed they were doing it.”

“But you have not had any, or you would not be so clear-headed right now.”

He nodded. “I don’t like to drink much anymore.”

“Go take her upstairs. If one of you wishes to stay with her, that’s fine. I need only talk to one of your leaders.”

Shiro tossed a quick glance at Allura. “Well, since one of them is passed out, you’ll have to settle for me.”

“You’re not staying out here alone,” Keith demanded.

“No, I’m not,” he agreed. “Hunk, would you...?”

“Yeah, I got it, Shiro, so long as someone gets the door for me.”

Lance did that. “I’ll go with to get the bedroom door, too, then I’ll come back out.”

Shiro paused Lance with a hand on his shoulder. “Go ahead and stay in. We’ve had a long night.” And then he leaned in to whisper, “And I could use our sharpshooter in the window, keeping an eye on things down here.”

Lance had been about to protest, but then he nodded in understanding. “Yeah, I’ll make sure everything’s good,” he said. He followed Hunk inside, the door closing behind him.

Shiro turned back to the figure. “So are we just going to talk here?”

“So long as none of the Laconice see my face, it does not matter if they see you talking to someone.”

“‘Laconice’?” Pidge asked.
“Those who are Morashi by blood. The ones who still live here in the city.” The hood turned towards the street. “Those who have cast me out once already. If they find me here again, then I will be killed.”

“We won’t let that happen,” Shiro promised.

“So long as you don’t try to kill us,” Keith tacked on. Shiro might have reprimanded him, but it was a fair point.

“So what do you want to talk to us about?”

“That very subject, actually,” they said. “You can call me Vecca. I was Laconice once. I was a proud citizen-soldier, top of my Lakidae, survivor of 23 lashes, and well-respected in my Temple.” The hood dipped. “Until I met Poula.” She sighed. “I tried not to. So much pride, so much strength, so much honor… I thought it impossible for me to succumb to the weakness of love.

“Then I thought I could hide it. I confessed to Poula, tried to convince her that we could manage the deception together.”

“I take it that didn’t end well?” Shiro asked.

There was a sniffle. “She went to the Council. They exiled me.”

“They didn’t do a very good job of it,” Keith observed.

When Vecca spoke again, she sounded smug. “I was not top of my Lakidae for nothing. Being exiled has not dulled my skills.”

“What is this ‘Lakidae’?” Pidge asked.

“It is our schooling and training. From the ages of five to fifteen, we are taught and trained. Then you undergo the Mastiad – the ritual flogging where you offer your blood to the Morashi people – and thereafter, you are a full-citizen, if you are Laconice. There are more steps if you are not, but my blood is that of the Lacons, so it was simple for me.”

Shiro recalled her matter-of-fact manner of saying that she’d survived 23 lashes and winced. “You were an honorable Morashi and…”

“I am an honorable Morashi!” she hissed quietly. “Even if they don’t see it that way. But my story is only one of many. I am not the only exile. Those who became too weak or infirm, those viewed as being weak because they fell in love or they wanted to stay with their children or they protested against enslaving other races.” She shook her head. “Those you bargain with either throw us away like trash or have us killed.”

“But they’re the ones with the treaty with the Galra,” Keith said, “so who else are we supposed to be talking to?”

“You are the only ones who can help us. Once you have proven yourself stronger than the Galra, once they agree to discuss terms with you…”

“You want us to include the return of the exiles in our treaty terms?” Shiro asked. When Vecca nodded, he sighed. “Dammit, I wish Allura hadn’t had so much to drink. She’s the diplomat.”

“And what if we can’t get them to listen to us? What if they reject our offer and keep the
“treaty with the Galra?” Pidge asked her.

“Then take us with you. WE will fight with you. We can be just as valuable to you as they could be, if not moreso."

Shiro wanted to agree. Hell, he wanted to just take the exiles away and leave this planet. But that wasn’t his call to make. “We have to talk about it. As a group. And there’s the demonstration tomorrow, and…”

“I understand. We would prefer to stay here and be returned to our home anyway. That is only possible if you convince the Council that you are a worthier ally than the Galra. I don’t require an answer tonight. I only wanted to present our plight to you.”

“Thank you, Vecca. I’m sure Allu- …the Princess will be very interested in hearing about this in the morning.”

Vecca chuckled. “She’ll feel terrible tomorrow morning. Weak, irritable, unfocused. Whatever you do, don’t let her drink more mogrul, at least not until she’s back to normal. Yureq helps steady us after a night of too much drinking; I don’t know how it will affect her, but it’s worth trying. The slaves inside should be able to provide some.”

She cast a look at the door. “Be careful speaking around them. Some slaves are angry, resentful, happy at the chance to throw off their chains, but some are resigned to their fates. Those would look to provide information to the Council to better their own lot. I do not know the slaves here, so I cannot speak to their trustworthiness.”

“Duly noted. I hate to seem rude, but we’ve had a long night.”

“Yes, I understand. Rest.”

He turned to go, Pidge already pulling the door open, but then Vecca said, “And… Shiro, is it? One more thing.”

He stopped and turned back to her. “Yes?”

“Be more careful about your slips of the tongue. One might think the princess is more than just your superior.”

“Told you,” Keith muttered quietly.

“Knock it off,” he snapped at his friend. He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Vecca. I’ll keep that in mind.”

There was an amused snort and then Vecca blended back into the shadows.

“Princess, are you with me?”

“I’m listening,” she repeated, clutching her glass of juice. This “yureq” smelled and tasted awful, but something about it soothed her aching head and sore throat. It was almost like a pleasant aftertaste in a way? Whatever it was, it was helping. “And I’m inclined to make that deal, if what Vecca is saying is the truth.”
“Yeah, I thought about investigating,” Shiro confirmed. “But that’s going to be hard today, with the demonstration.”

“No, look, it’s easy enough for the Lions to point out clusters of life signs,” Pidge added.

“Then why wouldn’t the Morashi go deal with them?” Keith asked.

“They were exiled,” Lance reminded him. “I think once they’re out of sight, they’re out of mind.”

“And that’s how the Morashi like it,” Shiro finished.

“So now there’s even more riding on our getting this treaty,” Allura groaned before taking another swig of yureq. “I’m happy to take them with us should things not go well, but if I could restore these lost people to their homes…” She dropped her eyes into the glass, looking at the blue-green liquid.

She heard Shiro’s voice. “Go get ready for the demonstration. Keith, see if you can get ahold of Councilor G’roknar; they’re supposed to be setting up targets for us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pidge, Hunk, see if you can boost the Lions’ scanning range. I doubt the exiles stay too close to the capital, but we’re limited in where we can go for this show.”

“On it!”

“You bet!”

“Lance, go make sure Keith doesn’t lose his temper with the Councilor.”

He snorted. “Yeah, yeah, I know you’re just trying to get rid of me. Don’t worry, I get that you two need alone time.”

“Yeah, no, I get it. Someone has to watch his back. I’m on it.”

The door shut.

The bed shifted with his weight.

Shiro put his arm around her. “Allura…”

“I can’t let them down.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “You won’t. We won’t.” His free hand pulled one of hers away from the glass so he could hold it gently.

“We had no idea what we were getting into here.”
“Well, your data was ten thousand years out of date,” he teased lightly.

She leaned against him. “I wish I could make it all better.”

“I know. We’ll do our best for them. That’s all we can do. And right now, you need to recover from last night.”

“Ugh. I had no idea I was drinking so much.”

“I know. I tried to get them to stop, but they wouldn’t listen to me.”

“I appreciate the effort.” She made herself take another swallow. “I wish we could just stay like this.”

“We can, for a little bit.” He rubbed her arm and squeezed her hand. “Let the team handle things for now.”

She shook her head a little. Even that small amount of side-to-side motion threatened to make her sick. “If you stay in here with me…”

“Well, I feel the need to point out that it’s love that’s considered a weakness, not sex.”

She pulled away to look at him. “Are you seriously suggesting…?”

He laughed. “No, not while we’re on a mission, and not while you’re recovering from that hangover. Also, I don’t think either of us are exactly in the mood. But what I am saying is that they’ll think I’m either in here helping you recover from last night, or that we’re, at worst, getting some Very Private Time together. Neither of which is going to impact us negatively. I don’t have to leave right now, Allura.”

She downed the rest of the yureq in one go, gasped, and offered the glass to him. “Get this away from me, will you?”

He snorted and took it, standing and walking towards the door. He set it down outside in the hallway, near the wall, then shut the door again.

“Come to bed,” she said, laying down. “I just want to be held for a bit. Maybe talk about something else.”

He nodded. “You and I both know we’re not going to be talking about ‘something else.’”

“Oh, at least let me pretend.” Because he was right. She’d talk about the Morashi and the exiles and the slaves, and he’d answer. Or he’d bring up a “quick question” about the mission, and she’d offer a reply, and… “I know we’re going to work, but I’d rather do that in your arms.”

His smile warmed her. “Gladly.” He stretched out next to her and she snuggled in against him.

For a long moment, there was nothing but the sound of their breathing.

“So,” she finally said, “tell me about the plans for the demonstration.”

Apparently, the Morashi had been more than prepared for their own personal Voltron show. They had assembled parts of a giant “monster” to put together for Voltron to destroy, as
well as numerous smaller targets for demonstrating the Lions’ powers. Times like this took Allura back to when she first saw the Lions at her father’s side: so majestic, so powerful, so…

“Impressive.” That was Supreme Judge Morak Quinstead, the Judicial Councilor. He didn’t sound all that impressed (but then he rarely did). Meanwhile, Commander G’roknar was apparently having a ripping good time, and High Priest Vanorr was enjoying the opportunity to drink.

Allura smiled at Quinstead as if he had been sincere. The Lions were still flying formations and figures for the ooh-ing and aah-ing crowd below, occasionally blasting targets just distant enough to be safe. Barely. The “monster” for Voltron to fight was being assembled.

“Our friends, allies, and certainly our enemies would say so,” she replied smoothly. “Voltron is unique in the universe.”

“I’d hope so. It has cats for hands.” Vanorr laughed.

“The Lion is a symbol of bravery and strength, is it not?” G’roknar put in. Their eyes were still alight, tracking the Lions’ paths through the sky. They looked like a child at a festival.

“And protection,” she put in.

“Hmph.” Quinstead was still “impressed” in that “you can do better” way. “Protection? Why protect those who are weaker than you? If they cannot defend themselves, what use are they?”

“We protect our allies as well as those who are oppressed and defenseless. Just because someone cannot fight, doesn’t make them useless.”

That got a round of laughter from the Councilors.

“I’m serious,” she said, trying not to sound put out. “It takes more than strength to win a war. It takes supplies and logistics, the resources necessary to keep your warriors fighting.”

“Yes, yes, alright,” G’roknar said with a dismissive wave of their hand. “But there’s no reason your medics and suppliers and whatnot can’t also be fighters.”

“You can train someone to fight; you can’t train a planet to give you water.”

That shut them up for a second, but then the Lions did a spectacular series of loops to get in formation to combine into Voltron, and the Councilors were back to chattering at what they were seeing.

Allura leaned back against her chair and tried not to smirk at the point she’d scored. She smiled when she heard Shiro over her comms command the team to, “Form Voltron!”

_I never get tired of watching this._

The crowd was more than a little impressed, too, and when the mighty robot stood before them, gleaming in the Morashi sun, they cheered so loud that Allura was sure they’d yell themselves hoarse. _At least we’re impressing the people._

Voltron formed sword and shield and the crowd was going wild. G’roknar was right there with them, and Vanorr was laughing about the cat head holding the sword. _That was Father’s Lion, thank you very much_. She made sure she wasn’t scowling.
As Voltron showed off some of its arsenal, Vanorr started talking about what she’d learned from the Black Paladin the night before. Allura corrected some minor mistakes, but she was impressed with both Vanorr’s curiosity and what must have been Shiro’s answers. The next time he says he’s not good at diplomacy, I’m reminding him of this.

Above all, it was hard for Allura to sit here surrounded by the Councilors and not think about the encounter with Vecca (or what the team had told her about it) and the clear fact that the Morashi enslaved others. It was hard for her to not to flinch away from accidental arm brushings.

You question the strength of Voltron, Defender of the Universe, Protector of the Innocent, but you must ‘prove’ your own strength through these blatant shows of… of bullying. That’s what it comes down to: you bully others. You build up yourselves as the expense of others. Physical strength, martial ability, that’s all you lot care about.

Why are we even here? Why are we even entertaining this notion? She was disgusted with and by them.

And, under other circumstances, she would have called it off by now. But now there was the knowledge of the exiles. They deserved a chance to fight for their home, to reclaim their status. As someone who could never go home again, she couldn’t bear to let anyone else feel like this.

Not for the first time, Allura pondered her status in the universe: princess of no people, a perpetual alien. There was no homeworld for her now. Her home was the Castle, was Voltron, Coran and the mice and the team and… and Shiro. She could make a home anywhere – even here! – if he was with her. And if they were allowed to be themselves. She could never hide her feelings for him long term; it was almost an insult to have to even for the short duration of this mission.

It’s hard to imagine anything stronger than the love Takashi and I have for each other.

The crowd burst into rapturous cheering as Voltron tore apart the “monster” and posed victoriously (that was Lance’s touch, she was almost sure). The Lions disbanded and did some more aerial tricks before landing around the stadium.

“We will talk about this,” G’roknar said, rising from their seat. “It was truly a spectacle!”

“Indeed.” Quinstead was still unflappable.

“The teamwork that must be needed to even walk the thing!” Vanorr was pointing out. “There are brethren of many battles without that level of coordination.”

“You exaggerate,” Quinstead insisted. But they were walking away from her. Apparently, since the show was over, so was their use for her. She assumed they’d be in touch when they wanted to talk again.

“Paladins?” she asked as the Councilors’ private seating area emptied out.

“Got a couple of good hits,” Hunk said. “One’s too far and too large; probably another city.”

“We’ve got a good starting place,” Shiro supplied.

“Well, it looks like our time is our own for now,” she told them. “Coran, are you reading this?”

“Aye, Princess. I see the data the Lions’ scans picked up; it does look like a small town or
“I suggest we send a small, two-person team to go make the acquaintance of these exiles; the rest of us will divert attention through obvious displays of gregariousness.”

There were groans at that. “I’m out,” Keith and Pidge said at the same time.

She grinned. “Glad to hear it, because I was going to send you two to the exile camp. Hunk, you and I can go shopping. I’m sure Shiro and Lance can come up with something to do.”

“You’re not going with Shiro?” Hunk asked.

“Not a good idea,” Lance replied instantly. “They’d be making goo-goo eyes at each other the whole time.”

“Lance,” Shiro warned.

But Allura was smiling. “I don’t think we’d be quite that bad, but I’d rather avoid temptation. Besides, perhaps I’ll see something I wish to buy for Shiro as a surprise.” She heard Lance and Hunk laugh. “The point is to be out and to be seen. Everyone will assume the rest of the team is doing likewise. I trust Keith and Pidge not to draw attention to themselves as they get out of the city.

“Meet back at our lodgings just before dark, in case Vecca returns.”

There was a chorus of affirmative responses.

“For now, smile and go greet your adoring fans. The crowds loved every second of the show.”

“Well, of course they did,” Lance preened.

“Commander G’roknar might be your biggest fan.”

“Just so long as he doesn’t want to drive us anywhere else,” Hunk muttered.

~End of Chapter 4~
Sorry about last week. Heck, I'm kinda sorry about this one; this is a pretty short chapter. But I was in Indiana until Tuesday evening, and... well, apparently I needed to sleep all day today. >_:>

Getting out of the city without being seen was the easy part. The hard part was getting through the city without getting killed.

“I really, really hate this place,” Pidge groused after their fourth near-death experience crossing a street.

“Well, let’s hurry up and get out of it then,” was all Keith said. Because if he started complaining, he might never stop.

At first, he’d thought it would be fine, possibly even fun: let’s watch Shiro and Allura pretend not to love each other. But it had quickly become so much worse than that. Morash had hurt Shiro and denied him his ability to be himself, something he needed after an incident. Morash would have it that Takashi Shirogane was weak and pathetic, and that pissed Keith off to no end. Shiro’d been through an almost literal hell, come out the other side, and continued to fight. He inspired people. And these assholes were going to say that he was weak because he’d found someone who’d been through a lot of shit, too, someone else who could understand him, someone who loved and cared for him? Fuck this place.

Keith didn’t always get along with Allura, but they’d long since realized that one of their strongest bonds was their shared love of Shiro (if in different ways). If there was one thing Keith knew, it was that the princess would kick the ass of anyone who tried to hurt Shiro. And now she had to deliberately separate herself from him, for the sake of this mission.

Yeah, yeah, he got that Vecca and the exiles would rather have their home back, but dammit, Keith was all for grabbing them and taking off. Let Morash destroy itself with its own stupid, bass-ackwards beliefs on what was and wasn’t “strength.” If this was how they wanted to be, so be it.

But then Shiro had never been the kind to give up on people.

Getting out of the city was a blessing in a lot of ways. Pidge brought up a compass of sorts, and they set off. The encampment was the opposite direction from the next nearest big city, so travelers between the two wouldn’t see them.

It’s like a landfill for people.

Once they were far enough away from Nekkel to allow it, the Red Lion came and met them. It’d take them the better part of a day to get to the exile camp on foot, but Red had them there in a matter of minutes (or doboshes).

When they walked out of his Lion, there were three people waiting for him: two Morashi
and someone who looked like Meine and Duerm. One of them was smirking as she walked forward.

“Had to come investigate for yourself, did you?” He recognized Vecca’s voice.

“Nice to see you for a change,” he replied. “Hope our showing up unannounced isn’t a problem.”

“Not at all. It shows you’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

Pidge snorted. “Sometimes he does, but in this case it was Shiro and Allura’s idea.”

Keith shot her a look but she just grinned at him.

Vecca chuckled. “This is Fewel,” indicating the Morashi, “and Pio of the Kanek.”

Pidge blinked. “Pio? Do you have a daughter named Meine?”

He brightened. “You have seen my daughter?”

Keith nodded. “She’s one of the servants at the guest lodge, along with Duerm, son of… um…”

“Quet,” Pidge supplied.

Pio heaved a sigh of relief. “She’s still alive. And Duerm! I hadn’t dared hope; the rest of the family… Well, better we not speak of it.”

“They both seem to be okay, if a bit timid,” Keith told him.

“That’s not a surprise,” Fewel commented. “Kanek society is caste-based; if you’re not warrior caste, you do not know how to fight. They would have submitted easily, for the sake of their own lives.”

The real surprise in that statement was how evenly it was delivered. Fewel didn’t sound like he was passing judgement; he was just stating facts.

Pio nodded. “Quet was warrior caste, but her lifemate was artisan. Duerm was artisan caste as his father. Hua and I were both merchant caste; Meine has a great head for figures, but no knowledge of how to defend herself.”

“Come, let’s not stand around here,” Vecca said. “We can speak more comfortably sitting. It’s a fine day; let’s go to Kert’s and sit outside. My treat.”

“Oooh, if Vecca’s treating, this must be a big deal,” Fewel said.

Vecca shoved him and he laughed. Pio just chuckled and they all set off.

The camp was just as sprawling and cramped as Nekkel, though obviously nowhere near as large. From the air, it was maybe 1/10th the size of the city. But there were still a lot of people around them as they walked in.

The buildings were mismatched and cobbled together. None of them had a second story – probably couldn’t take the weight. A few buildings here and there looked more like normal Morashi construction, including about a dozen of them all next to each other as they reached the center. It was to one of these that Vecca was leading them as she insisted to Fewel that she was
“frugal” and not “cheap.”

This building had a huge sun-faded red awning out in front of it and, beneath the awning, a few scattered chairs and tables. The chairs were a motley assortment, but the tables all matched each other. “Sit, sit!” Vecca declared. “I’ll go get us some drinks and some caltari.”

“Get a sweet and a savory!” Pio called after her.

“Don’t push it,” Fewel advised him as they took their seats. He smiled tightly at Keith and Pidge. “We are glad you’ve come though. Even if you can’t do anything but take us with you, we would all welcome the chance to do something more with our lives than just waste away out here.”

Pidge leaned forward. “Can I ask why you were exiled?”

He nodded. “I was the commander of Vecca’s klysop, her battle group, I suppose you might call it. When Poula betrayed her, I spoke on Vecca’s behalf before the Council. Speaking up once on behalf of a good warrior is one thing, but I continued to advocate for her to stay. When she was exiled, so was I.” He shrugged. “It was just as well; I would have gone with her regardless. She doesn’t deserve this. She is honorable, just, and one of the best, not just in her klysop or her Lakidae, but also in Badhi Temple.”

“Didn’t the Commander mention ‘Badhi Temple’?” Pidge asked.

Keith shrugged.

But Fewel nodded. “Wevel G’roknar is Badhi Temple, as Vecca and I were. I had thought that being of the same Temple, he would…” He shook his head. “But I suppose not.”

“What is the big deal with the Temples?” Keith asked.

“Upon becoming a full citizen, you must join one of the Temple Clans. Each clan is devoted to a particular deity – in this case, Badhi, Goddess of War. But each clan is also your main social group. Each clan has a favorite sport, favorite colors and symbols, that sort of thing.”

“Like a team or a gang,” Pidge surmised.

Fewel thought about that before nodding. “I suppose so. Your allegiance to your clan is third in your loyalties, after your family name – which is second – and the Morashi people as a whole, which must always be first.

“To be one of the best in a Temple devoted to the Goddess of War is no small thing. I would bet on Vecca’s skills over Wevel’s any day. Before Poula, she had a good shot at being Military Councilor one day.”

“Which makes me wonder if he saw this as a way to get rid of a rival,” Pio commented.

“Possibly. He wouldn’t have dared move against her without Poula’s accusation.”

“Stop speaking of it as if it weren’t true.” Vecca walked out carrying a tray of drinks. “They’ll bring the caltari out when it’s done, and yes, I did actually get one sweet and one savory, thank you.” She set the tray down on the center of the table and fell into a seat, grabbing up one of the mugs. “I loved Poula. It’s not some trumped-up accusation; it was true. Part of me still does, even after all of this. I’ll never open my heart to her again, but I love what we had before I confessed. I love the Poula I thought I knew.” She drank deep.
“This isn’t *mogrul*, is it?” Pidge asked suspiciously.

“Or *yureq*?” Keith pursued. “I don’t know what that tastes like, but smelling it was bad enough.”

Fewel and Vecca laughed; Pio looked like he was having some sort of mirthful fit, he was laughing so hard.

“No, this is *seda* juice,” Vecca assured them.

“Lightly-flavored water, if you ask me,” Fewel grumbled as he took a mug.

Pidge reached for the nearest mug and took a sip. “Oooh, this is actually good!”

Keith shrugged and took up a mug. He hadn’t thought the food here was that bad, really, even if it was strong. He took a sip and his eyebrows went up. It was like fruit punch, maybe a *little* spicy. Pidge was right about it being good, and he took another, longer drink.

“And how’d you get here, Pio?” Pidge asked.

“I escaped my slavery. I had been separated from Meine. I had no idea where she was, or I would have gone to her, brought her with me.” He sighed. “The Morashi invaded and enslaved us. Our warriors were strong, we thought, but they were no match for the Morashi, either in skill or in number.”

“Oh, give yourself more credit than that,” Vecca said. “I remember a few very skilled Kanekkian warriors. Well, one or two, at any rate.”

“You steal stuff,” Keith clarified.

“Only what we have to. Medicine, mostly. Nekkel throws out a staggering amount of decent food, easily-repaired furnishings, etc.”

“Like us,” Fewel commented. “One tiny defect, and we are discarded.”

“Oh, here we go again,” Pio groaned.

“You should hear him on *mogrul*,” Vecca warned.

“Please, no.”

Keith cleared his throat. “How many exiles are here?”

“Too many,” Fewel said. “Last count was near 10,000.”

Pidge choked on her juice. “Ten *thousand*?! As in *people*?”

Pio nodded. “Little more than half of that are Morashi; the rest are escaped slaves like myself.”

“In a camp this size you have ten thousand people?” Keith asked.
They all nodded. “We’re practically sleeping on top of each other,” Vecca said. “Bundled up like arrows in a quiver.”

A Morashi came out with two baskets just then and set them on the tray. “Enjoy.” And he left. Each basket was filled with thin triangles of bread: one basket’s had a reddish seasoning on them and the other a deep blue.

“We practically sleep on top of each other,” Vecca said. “Bundled up like arrows in a quiver.”

Caltari! Pio declared. “One of the rare joys of living in Morash. Do try the sweet ones.” He reached for a red triangle.

Pidge reached for a blue and Keith grabbed a red. The red ones must have been sweet: it was a little like cinnamon toast, he thought, though with more bite.

“Caltari!” Pio declared. “One of the rare joys of living in Morash. Do try the sweet ones.” He reached for a red triangle.

“Pio,” Pidge paused to figure out how to describe the blue one she’d bitten into, “…like a sort of nutty salt. Like salty nuts, but more nut than salt. It’s good though! Not as strong as that stuff we had at the feast.”

We can’t season our food properly out here,” Fewel moaned. “We have to stretch our supplies, you know.”

“It’s perfect. Can we bring some of this back? Hunk – the Yellow Paladin – would love it!”

“Assuming Pio doesn’t eat it all,” Vecca allowed.

Pio did, in fact, have a mouthful of red caltari.

“It is good to have you here,” Vecca continued, “but I had hoped one of your leaders would come.”

“Of course the leaders would be the ones everyone would want to look at,” Fewel realized. “So they would draw the most attention.”

“I understand,” Vecca said. “They are clever as well as strong.” She beamed. “Good allies.”

“We do want to help,” Pidge said. “We want to help as many people as possible, and from the moment we found out the Morashi took slaves, we’ve all been a little uneasy.”

Keith added, “Allura’s going to do everything she can to…”

But he was cut off. “Allura?” Vecca and Fewel exchanged a glance, then Vecca turned back to him. “Shouldn’t she be ‘The Princess’ to you?”

Pidge cleared her throat. “In formal settings, she’s ‘Princess Allura of Altea,’ but we’ve all fought together for so long now that we’re friends as well as comrades, you know? We probably ought to use her title, but…”

“Oh, I see,” Vecca replied. “Well, now I feel foolish lecturing Shiro on his use of her name. I thought perhaps he had fallen in love with her and was doing a poor job of hiding it!”
Keith cleared his throat. “As I was saying, Princess Allura is going to do everything she can to get you guys your homes back. She lost her own home, so she knows how that feels. But we’ll take you all with us, if it comes to that.”

“And Meine and Duerm, too,” Pidge added.

“I would be eternally grateful,” Pio said with a smile. “Hua died before the invasion; our little girl is all I have left.”

“We could see some of your demonstration from here,” Fewel said. “Voltron is very impressive. It’s hard to look at that huge and powerful robot and not feel some sense of hope.”

“That’s the idea,” Keith said. “Voltron protects those who need it. And that’s what we’re going to do. Whatever it takes.”

As much as he might have liked to stroll through Nekkel with Allura at his side, Shiro was very, very glad to have Lance with him.

They were constantly thronged by Morashi who wanted to see and touch and talk to them. Most of them hadn’t seen the fight in the arena (thankfully), but many of them had seen the demonstration, and they wanted a chance to personally ooh and aah over the ‘warriors of Voltron.’

And Lance was a marvel through it all. He basked in the limelight, seemed to soak it up and almost redirect it away from them. He could charm the crowd, give them a quick anecdote or tidbit of trivia, and then just walk away. The fans would part for them and let them pass.

“I’d never have gotten past the first group,” Shiro commented after the sixth was left swooning in their wake.

“Gotta give the people what they want, Shiro,” Lance told him, “but always leave ‘em wanting more.”

Shiro chuckled and shook his head. “Thanks for all of this, Lance. And for distracting Allura at the feast, too.”

“She’s a good dancer, actually,” Lance said with a grin. “I had fun. Uh, I mean, it was just dancing…”

“It’s okay, Lance. I’m glad you both had fun.”

“Yeah, right up until she collapsed, anyway. She muttered something about wanting you and a bed and just shoved her way through the crowd.”

He could feel the heat in his cheeks. “Yes, well. Thank you for rescuing me. Then and now.”

“You think we’re gonna be able to pull all this off? I mean, the treaty and the exiles and all?”

“If there’s a way to do it, we’ll figure it out,” Shiro said. Because, as a leader, he shouldn’t say what he really thought, which was, I haven’t the first quiznaking clue. “You know how Allura
is; once she sets her mind on something, it generally gets done.”

Lance laughed. “We’re all pretty much like that, though. That’s why we’re all such a good team. Some of us might need more convincing than others, and some of us are a little too hot-headed to really think things through sometimes…”

“Don’t bring Keith into this.”

“Well, I also meant Allura.”

Shiro laughed. It felt good. This was the most normal he’d felt the whole trip, honestly. Strolling along a city street, talking, laughing… It helped. It helped a lot.

And then they hit another mob of adoring fans. Shiro stood back and smiled and nodded and let Lance work his magic. He still wasn’t sure how they were going to pull this off, but he felt better able to face whatever came their way.

~End of Chapter 5~
I really need to stop updating on Fridays ‘cause that means dropping chapters on season drop days sometimes.

Who wants to put odds on Lance having come up with the play idea?

It might have actually worked

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Allura had been prepared for anything except the blank stares and pointed silence she and Shiro were getting now.

The rest of the team were out and about, continuing to schmooze their fans. She’d taken Shiro’s suggestion and let Lance take point on the charm offensive. But there was to be no contact with the exiles today. They needed to appear to be playing by the book, at least at the beginning.

And things had gone well. The Councilors had asked for terms to consider. And Allura hadn’t held back.

“Break your treaty with the Galra in order to ally with us. Bring back the exiles and free your slaves.”

She’d expected outraged shouts, indignant questions. Instead, she was getting this.

G’roknar looked like they just didn’t understand the words she’d said. Vanorr was staring in something akin to horror. And Quinstead was just blank, like she’d somehow wiped his mind entirely.

He was the first one to recover. “You are already asking much in your request that we break our treaty with the Galra. Now you wish to dishonor us into the bargain.”

“DISHONOR!” G’roknar emphasized with a roar, jumping to their feet.

“How do you even know of the exiles?” Vanorr wanted to know. She was suddenly much keener than the happy-go-lucky drunk they’d seen the last couple of quintants.

“We know a great deal you might not want us to have found out,” Shiro responded.

Allura raised her chin, looking imperious. She’d come to this place in gilded armor, then swapped it out for princessly robes. She was in her flight suit now, ready not to show off or to simply talk, but to fight. “Our intelligence-gathering skills are only another reason that we make good allies,” she pointed out. “Superior to the Galra in strength, intelligence…”

“No,” Quinstead said. “My vote is no.”

“No,” G’roknar and Vanorr said in unison.

“We will not ally with you,” G’roknar said separately. “The Galra did not dishonor us thus.”
“Let me be clear,” Allura said, keeping her demeanor unruffled. This was much more like what she’d expected of them. “We’ll ally with you, your returned exiles, and your freed slaves, or we will take your exiles and slaves with us. The exiles have indicated an interest in joining the Coalition. The former slaves will be considered refugees; any of them willing to join the Coalition are welcome, and the rest will be re-homed away from you.

“You are conquerors and enslavers, and that is exactly what we are fighting against. We believe everyone is capable of change, and we are offering you that chance.”

“To change our culture?” Vanorr shot back. “The very way we live our lives?”

“When it depends upon subjugating other races and tossing aside people who have done nothing wrong, yes,” Shiro all but growled.

She wanted to put a hand on his, to steady him and calm him down. The best she could do was a quiet, “Shiro,” in warning. That was enough to get him to clear his throat and resettle himself a little. It was like he was visibly reining himself back in.

“You’ve seen the smallest portion of what Voltron is capable of,” she reminded the Councilors. “We have already wrested a third of the former empire from the grasp of the Galra.”

“One third. The Galra still control two-thirds, including this sector,” came Quinstead’s smooth rejoinder. “We are better off with the Galra at current, and while your machine seems powerful, your demands are beyond the pale.”

Allura sighed. They’d be at this awhile. She gave Shiro the barest nod.

He turned away, muttering, “Fantastic,” in a deadpan tone.

Lance glanced over at the rest of the team as he heard Shiro say the code word over the comm links. They nodded, and Lance cleared his throat.

“So, how about a thrilling tale of one of our many exploits?”

The crowd cheered. Lance found some steps to ascend, and the rest of the team came up after him. “Keith will be the evil lizard ro-beast for this. Pidge and Hunk will play the part of Voltron!”

“Lance…” Pidge warned, but it was too late. Hunk was happily boosting her up onto his shoulders.

“And this is the story of how we liberated Balmera X-95-VOX and freed the Balmerans from their enslavement to the EVIL GALRA EMPIRE!!!” He threw in some laser gun sounds for effect.

There was some muttering amongst the crowd, but Lance didn’t give them time to react. He launched straight into the story.

The Council were going to need convincing, it seemed. And they were going to leave that up to Allura and Shiro. But, in the meantime, it was up to him – and the others – to start swaying the public. So, for now, Lance did his best to wow ‘em with the story of their thrilling battle, occasionally filling in roles as needed. He thought he made a particularly good Shay, with just the right amount of smooch noises thrown in Hunk’s direction. Keith, of course, had no career in
drama in his future, but Lance made do with what he had for now. This was, of course, only the first step.

He played up the Balmerans’ physical strength and their dedication to each other. He also played up that they’d been slaves of the Galra for so long that they had no idea what freedom even was. He wasn’t sure if he was getting the idea across, but, hey, baby steps.

Most importantly, the crowd erupted in cheers as Voltron and Allura were victorious, the Balmera was freed, and the ro-beast destroyed! (He left out the part about it coming back to life later; that was a tale for another time, if at all.)

“Did we all enjoy that, folks?” he asked the audience.

They roared an enthusiastic, “Yes!” and gave up some more applause.

“Well, we’d be glad to do a slightly better version for you all tonight, outside our lodgings! We’ll round up some more – and maybe better – actors,” he shot Keith a brief glare, “to tell another, larger, even more epic tale of Voltron’s triumphs,” the crowd cheered, “over the lying, backstabbing Galra!” and the crowd booed.

So far, so good. He fanned himself dramatically as if he’d been the one doing all the work – though he had been doing most of the talking. “For now, I could use a drink. Maybe a little nosh?”

There were many offers from which to choose. The others slipped away while Lance continued to bask in the adoration he so richly deserved. He had to be the ultimate distraction all by himself. As a middle child, he’d prepared all his life for this.

“You’re joking.”

“THIS is your plan?”

“I don’t know, I rather like it.”

“Look,” Keith said. “I don’t think anyone likes this plan except for Lance.”

“I like it,” Hunk chimed in.

“…and Hunk. But Shiro and Allura think it’s our best shot.”

“There are 3 Councilors and… how many other Morashi?” Pidge asked pointedly.

“You’re talking about revolution,” Fewel groaned.

Keith shook his head. “It’d be nice, but it’s not what we’re banking on.”

“This is just to get you guys into the city,” Hunk clarified apologetically. “We don’t expect the Council to budge. We’ll make a last-ditch effort to convince the citizens – the, uh, Laconice – but if nothing else, we’ll have you all in one easy-to-pickup place. You’ll get a chance to go back to your homes, say goodbye if that’s possible, maybe get some stuff you might have had to leave behind, but…”

“This is it,” Keith summed up. “Either you come with us or you come back to the city. So
“This is it,” Keith summed up. “Either you come with us or you come back to the city. So pack your stuff.”

“And learn your lines,” Pidge put in. “Who knows? Maybe the play’s the thing.”

“If nothing else, we want them to see exactly what they’re losing. Not just an alliance with us, but how many of their friends and family and free labor are about to disappear. Maybe the shock will convince them, even if we can’t.”

Pio shook his head. “At least I’ll get to be with my daughter again, one way or the other. I can never thank you enough for that.”

“And we will prove ourselves strong allies for you,” Vecca said.

“I’m sure you will,” Pidge replied, “but that’s… kind of not the point?”

“Yeah, everyone is useful in their own way,” Hunk agreed. “Strong is great, but there’s lots of different ways to be strong.”

“And no matter how strong you are on your own, we’re always going to be stronger together,” Keith said. “That’s the point. We defeat our enemies by working together.”

Pidge coughed and Keith shot her a look. Unfortunately, that meant he wasn’t paying attention to Hunk.

“And it took Keith a long time to figure that out, so when he says it, you know he really means it.” He topped that off with a big smile.

Keith muttered under his breath, “It didn’t take me that long.”

Shiro and Allura made it back to the guest lodging just in time. At least, she thought so, but Lance was immediately on their case about getting into costume and making sure they knew their lines.

“Remind me why we thought this was a good idea?” she muttered as she headed upstairs to her room.

“Winning hearts and minds, Princess,” he replied.

She groaned a little. They’d had a long day of banging their heads against the Council, attempting futilely to change their minds. Of course, it also kept them off the streets and away from the people. It kept them from trying to change the minds of the Morashi people back.

Still, it had been a long day, the servants (and the team) didn’t seem to be around, and they were supposed to be changing people’s minds anyway. She turned back to Shiro and reached out to grab him, hauling him towards her in the hallway.

“Pri-…!”

She didn’t let him finish. And he melted into the kiss almost immediately, fingers combing into her hair as he welcomed and returned her affections. She held him and kissed him and let herself feel normal, just for a little bit. *We need to add this to the end of the show,* she thought defiantly. She wasn’t normally one for public displays of affection, but in this case, with these
people who thought love was a weakness? *Let’s prove to them they’re wrong.*

But then the ground started shaking. They broke from each other’s lips and ran to the windows.

“Can’t see,” Shiro said, and started bolting down the steps. She was hot on his heels.

They burst outside, eyes almost immediately drawn skyward.

A Galra battlecruiser was hovering low over Nekkel, and she could see smaller ships landing in various spots around the city.

“So much for our production of the thrilling battle of Nixha-12,” Keith said.

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it,” Lance muttered.

“We have to get to the Lions,” Shiro declared.

“They’re outside the city!” Hunk called out.

“We’ll buy you the time,” Allura said.

“And you won’t do it alone.” She turned to someone wearing a hastily-thrown together Nixhian mask. They pulled it off to reveal Vecca’s face. “We will fight with you.”

“Thank you,” Allura said with a smile.

“I’ll drive you!” Fewel said. “As soon as we find a car!” He darted into the stunned crowd.

Shiro gave Allura his bayard and a quick kiss before running off after Fewel and the team.

Allura stood forward to address the gathered audience. “THESE are supposed to be your allies!” she yelled. That got their attention. “Do allies menace your homes like this?”

“They come here like this for YOU!” someone pointed out in the crowd.

“They come here like this for ALL OF US,” she called back. “Do the Morashi not have the right to even speak with others now? Your Council rejected our offer and STILL the Galra have come, not to thank you, but to finally subjugate you! Tomorrow we would have left, peacefully, but that doesn’t matter to the Empire!

“So now it is the citizens of Morash who must decide! Do you let the Galra Empire tell you what to do? Will you let them destroy you and your homes? Will you let them enslave you now as they have with so many other races?”

“NO ONE ENSLAVES THE MORASHI!” a different voice screamed out in the crowd.

“THEN TO ARMS!” Vecca yelled from beside Allura.

The crowd cheered and Allura wasn’t entirely surprised to see several weapons already hoisted into the air. *Of course many of them are already armed.* But that was good; it meant she had a standing force ready.

“They main force will be sentry drones,” she told Vecca. “Some small units of actual
Galra soldiers, mostly to order the drones about and to give the bloodthirsty their chance at battle.”

Vecca grinned. “I will tear through the scrap to get to the bone.”

*Speaking of bloodthirsty*… But there was no time to comment on that.

The Invasion of Morash had begun.

*~End of Chapter 6~*
“I guess they’re not here for my directorial debut,” Lance pouted over the comms.

“Their loss,” Shiro consoled him, running into Black’s open mouth. Fewel had already dropped off Keith; the car was already a cloud of dust as he headed for Green.

Hunk chimed in with, “Yeah, I was looking forward to Keith being that Galra commander guy.”

“Why am I always the bad guy?” Keith complained.

“Because you can’t act,” Lance told him at the same time that Pidge said, “Because Lance hates you.”

“Paladins, focus up!” Shiro called out, trying to keep from smirking as Black took off for the Galra fleet. “Allura and Vecca are going to deal with the ground forces; that means it’s up to us to take out the air support. Keith, draw the fighters’ fire. Pidge, Lance, take care of the fighters. Hunk, you and I need to make sure those ion cannons don’t fire on Nekkel.

“And yes, Lance, feel free to be a bit flashy. Just remember that this isn’t a demonstration: it’s more important to take them out than to show off.”

There was a chorus of affirmatives. Shiro spared a quick glance at the ground: they’d already landed two cruisers’ worth of troops, it looked like. He shoved his worry aside.

“Coran?”

“Sorry, I’m a bit busy!” There was the sound of an explosion and the wailing of sirens. “I only just got the comms back up!”

_Well, that explains why we didn’t get a heads up. At least he’s okay._ “Is there enough of Allura’s energy stored in the system for a wormhole?” he asked as he initiated Black’s jaw blades.

“I… think so? Should be, at any rate, but it’s a bit hard to check right now!”

He sliced along a cruiser until he got to the ion cannon. “Then jump out of there, Coran. Get to the other side of the planet.”

“Good plan. I’ll run some quick repairs and then come in and catch the fleet from behind!”

“If you can, that’d be great. Focus on making sure the Castle’s okay first.”

Pidge piped up with, “Jump to these coordinates, Coran; they’ll put you between the fleet and the local star; the light and radiation should help cloak the Castle a bit. They’d have to bother
looking for you to find you.”

“Thanks, Number Five! Initiating jump!”

Shiro swooped away, the sounds of explosions behind him. They were getting pretty good at taking down Galra fleets, but he wasn’t about to let himself – or the team – get complacent.

For now, at least, Vecca was doing most of the fighting. People had brought very young children to the expected play, and Allura was herding them into the guest lodgings. “Pio!”

She saw Meine straighten and start scanning the crowd just before she turned to do the same. She caught sight of him tossing his mask aside. He ran straight up to Meine and hugged her as she started to cry.

“I’m glad you two are together, but I need you to help get the non-combatants away from here if possible, or at least protected,” she ordered.

“There is a large cellar beneath this building,” Meine said. “It serves as a storm shelter in addition to storage.”

“That’ll do for now. Get the children and elderly in there.”

“We will,” Pio promised. “Hurry, daughter.”

Allura turned and ran towards where she’d last seen Vecca. Shiro’s bayard became an energy whip in her hands, and she sliced her way through sentries trying to get at the few fleeing citizens.

“Vecca!” she yelled into the crowd.

There was a loud bark of a laugh, followed by, “Over here, Princess!”

“Well, someone’s having a good time.” She shoved a sentry back into its comrades and took off in the direction of the voice.

Vecca had pulled the head off a sentry and was using it to punch another drone in the face. “It’s been so long since I had a good fight!”

She nodded. “Acknowledged.”

“Don’t you want to grab one of their guns?” Allura asked.

“This is more fun!”

Allura lashed the head off an oncoming drone and with a jaunty, “Heads up!” tossed it to Vecca.

She laughed as she grabbed it in mid-air. “Thank you!”

“I’ve got your back,” she told their Morashi friend, as she turned to take on another sentry. “And try to leave a Galra officer or two alive for questioning?”
“Welllll, maybe just one.”

It wasn’t a hard battle, just long. Shiro hated to admit how much he’d enjoyed it. It wasn’t that he liked killing; he didn’t. He absolutely did not, no matter how necessary it was. But to be back in the Black Lion, to be doing something he was used to – even if it was violence – to be out there with his team protecting people? It helped. It was a little like he was taking his frustrations with the Morashi out on the Galra. No. No, it was a lot like that.

*I’ll talk with Allura about it later. Do some meditation. It doesn’t make me a monster.*

If he said it enough times, he might believe it.

The Castle had proved invaluable in the battle, coming in from behind and catching the fleet unawares. Shiro sometimes directed his attention to Allura’s comm links, and over the clashing sounds of battle, he could hear her ordering the Morashi citizens. He heard them reply in the affirmative and couldn’t help smiling. It didn’t mean they’d necessarily won them over – the middle of a battle was not the time or place to quibble – but they were working together. It was promising.

“Paladins,” Allura said over the comms, “finish up out there and return immediately. We have a new friend I want to introduce to you.”

He grinned, but it was Keith who asked, “You captured an officer?”

“Several, but only one’s cooperative. The others are safely out for the count, and I’ve convinced the Morashi to imprison them rather than kill them.”

“We’ll surround Nekkel and take our speeders in this time,” Shiro reported. Last time, each of them had been thronged by enough well-wishers that they’d had rides back into the city proper. None of them had really wanted to accept them, but it had seemed rude when they were still trying to get the Council to like them. The *less* time I have to spend in a Morashi-driven car, the happier I’ll be.

“Just cleaning up the last couple of cruisers,” Lance commented, “then we’ll be on our way back.”

“On your six, Lance!” Pidge called out.

“I got it,” Hunk replied.

“We’ll be down soon,” Shiro told Allura.

“It looks like you were right about the Galra,” G’roknar said in the aftermath of the battle. They were bloodied and bleeding, but had a big smile planted on their face.

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean we were wrong,” Vanorr pointed out. She, too, had seen some battle, but right now she was tending to the more grievous of G’roknar’s wounds.
“You were wrong to cast aside good people – and good fighters,” Allura told them. Vecca was standing proudly right next to her, casting scornful looks upon the two Councilors. “They helped defend your city and your people against the invasion.”

“Matters relating to our own culture are our own business,” Vanorr replied. “But I won’t say you haven’t given us something to consider.”

“There’s a more pressing matter,” G’roknar said. “Did the Galra follow you here to launch this invasion? And if so, why wait so long? Why only target Nekkel? Their timing and operational actions are… interesting.”

“I thought so as well,” Allura agreed. “We have one of their officers waiting to enlighten us.”

“I have another question,” Vecca piped up. “Where’s the Supreme Judge?”

The two Councilors looked at each other and then around.

“Was he not with you two?” Allura asked them.

“Well, we all rushed into battle,” G’roknar pointed out. “We didn’t think about sticking together.”

“A common failing,” Vecca muttered under her breath.

“I did not even see which direction he went,” Vanorr admitted. “I gathered weapons to distribute and then joined the battle myself.”

“Shiro,” Allura said.

“Princess?”

“Quinstead’s missing; we need to find him.”

“I’m on my way for prisoner interrogation,” he replied over her comm earrings, broadcasting for everyone around her to hear. “Keith will lead the rest of the team in the search. Are we considering Quinstead a missing person of interest or simply missing?”

“For now, the latter,” she said. But she had a bad feeling.

He must have picked up on her tone. “Understood,” he said, and the word carried a certain emphasis with it, to her ears at least.

“Does that mean I get to knock him unconscious to bring him back?” Keith asked.

“Dibs!” Lance called.

“You don’t get to call dibs on that!”

“No knocking anyone out,” Shiro interrupted them. “Unless it’s absolutely necessary. And hopefully it won’t be.”

She couldn’t help smiling fondly at hearing them. “I would think he’d come willingly,” was all she said though. Personally, she kind of hoped Keith – or someone – *would* knock him out.
But it was Vanorr who scoffed. “You don’t know Quinstead.”

G’roknar nodded in agreement. “He might say no just to spite you.”

Vecca rolled her eyes. “How did he ever get to be in charge?”

“Because he defeated the previous Supreme Judge in combat.”

“I know that! I wasn’t seriously asking!”

Allura wanted to ask. Allura wanted to ask any number of questions, such as, “How does trial by combat prove that someone is worthy to sit in judgement of others?” and also, “What the ever-loving quiznak?!” but she kept her mouth shut. It wouldn’t help matters, and things were edging towards a tipping point. A good tipping point, for a change. She didn’t want to derail that.

Black’s speeder drew to a stop near them. She smiled at Shiro as he stepped out and pulled off his helmet. “Everything went okay down here then, I take it?”

Vecca was grinning ear to ear. “Fantastic! I haven’t had so much fun since my exile!”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replied, voice a little tight. It was a strange tone, and Allura made a mental note to talk with him about it later.

“We had initially evacuated non-combatants to the guest lodgings, but once the battle was over, we cleared them out and moved prisoners in there instead,” she told him. “There’s a cellar, apparently; we’ve got the ones who are unconscious down there. Our new friend is waiting in one of the rooms.”

“All right, well, let’s see what we can find out.”

“You’re not questioning him without at least one of us present,” Vanorr insisted.

“And if they’re present, then I want to be present,” Vecca chimed in. “I don’t trust the Council to tell us the truth, especially when one-third of them seems to have run off.”

G’roknar was incensed. “Quinstead would not have fled!”

“Then where is he?” she shot back.

“Stop that!” Allura interrupted them. “Vanorr, Vecca, you can come with us. G’roknar, I’m sure you’d rather see to the city’s safety and security, hm?”

They shot her a look before they grumbled something and headed off. Allura sighed in relief.

Vanorr dusted off her robes a bit. “Very well. Let’s talk to this traitor.”

“We don’t know that he’s a traitor,” Shiro pointed out.

“He’s willing to speak to his captors; he is betraying his battle group and leader.”

“What if all he does is spit in our eyes?” Vecca said. “That’s not ‘betrayal.’ Hell, I’d say I’d talk just to be left conscious so that I could possibly figure out a way to escape and free my comrades.”

Vanorr was quiet a tick or two before allowing, “Excellent point.” She didn’t sound happy
about acknowledging it, but at least she had.

Allura led the way into the guest lodgings. Duerm met them at the door with a big smile; Pio and Meine were talking quietly just outside the open door of the room they’d stashed the Galra officer in.

“Thank you for guarding him, friends,” Allura said with a polite smile. “Was he any trouble?”

“He got a bit squirmy at one point,” Pio reported, “but he hasn’t been able to escape.”

“Good job. Are you two okay? I’m sorry, I didn’t even get a chance to ask with everything going on.”

“We’re more than okay,” Meine said. Her smile was shy but her voice was strong – an odd combination, but one Allura found endearing. “Thanks to you, I have my father back.”

“We’re glad to help,” Allura said, trying not to think of what it would be like to have her own father back. *Pull it together, the prisoner can see you.*

“And we’ll be glad to help the Voltron Coalition,” Pio replied. Vanorr snorted dismissively, but Allura just ignored her.

“Thank you, Pio. We’ll be happy to have you.” She cleared her throat and strode into the room now.

The Galra officer had his wrists and ankles bound to a chair with sturdy (if old-fashioned) metal cuffs. He glared up at them – especially Vecca, who’d captured him in the first place – and said, “Took you long enough.”

“Did you have somewhere you need to be?” Shiro asked.

The officer just cleared his throat and shut up.

“You know, if you’ve changed your mind about being cooperative, we *can* just knock you out like the others,” Allura reminded him.

“Just ask me the questions,” he grumped.

“How did you know Voltron was here?” Shiro asked. “I assume that’s why you only showed up at Nekkel and not the other Morashi cities.”

“We were ordered to come here,” he replied. “Commander said they knew where Voltron was, that they were trying to convert more people, and we needed to show them what would happen if they did. Plus, you know, capture Voltron.”

“Yes, the Empire has a stellar track record there,” Allura deadpanned.

“Wait,” Vecca said. “You didn’t actually answer the question.”

“She’s right,” Shiro agreed. “I asked *how* you knew.”

“I told you how I knew,” the officer said. “Commander told me.”

Allura sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose in annoyance.

“What were your commander’s exact words?” Vanorr prompted.
Their prisoner paused to think. “Something like, ‘We’ve been informed of Voltron’s location.’”

Allura looked up at that.

“‘Been informed,’” Shiro repeated.

“So the next question is…” Vanorr started.

“…who did the informing?” Vecca finished.

They all looked at the officer expectantly.

“Commander didn’t say! I assumed it was higher up the chain of command; that’s how it normally goes.”

“Excuse me,” Shiro said. As he walked out of the room, Allura could already hear him saying, “Keith, any luck?”

“So, the point of showing up here was to capture Voltron and… what?” Vecca asked.

“Show you lot what happens when you double-cross the Empire. We went easy on you before because you’re a backwards little planet in the middle of nowhere and so hidebound about honor we didn’t think you’d betray us.”

“I’d watch your arrogant tone,” Vanorr warned him, “given your current situation.”

“So the plan was to put the Morashi back in their place?” Allura clarified.

“Yeah. And leave a garrison here this time. Do it all properly.”

“You’d enslave us as you have other planets,” Vecca stated.

He nodded and Allura glanced at Vanorr. She was grim as she informed the captive, “You might try to enslave us. True Morashi would die rather than be enslaved.”

He shrugged as best he could while cuffed to the chair. “Your choice. Then we don’t have to waste people looking over you. It’s not like there’s much out here that we need that badly.”

The Councilor looked affronted.

“Seems to me like the Morashi don’t need the Galra all that much either,” Vecca retorted. She looked to Allura. “Please tell me I can knock him back out?”

“Your choice,” Allura said with a thin smile.

Vecca’s choice was swift and precise. The captive was out cold.

Vanorr shook her head. “They weren’t truly interested in an ‘alliance’ after all. It was just an empty word to them so that we could be one more people under their thumb.”

“And one less people rising up against them,” Vecca added.

The Councilor squared her shoulders. “I am going to speak to G’roknar about this.”

“And… what of the missing Supreme Judge?” Allura asked cautiously. Shiro must be
suspecting his involvement, just as she was.

“You’ll have two-thirds of the Council on your side,” she replied. “I feel confident saying that at this point.”

“But all three are needed for something that affects all Morashi,” Vecca groaned. “It has to be unanimous.”

“Unfortunately correct. Quinstead must be found – dead or alive. If he is dead, the trials begin to find his successor.”

Allura suppressed her own groan. “Let us hope the Paladins find him alive, then.”

Vecca smiled at her. “Perhaps, if he’s dead, Voltron can take the exiles and former slaves back to join your Coalition and then return for the judgement once a new Supreme Judge has been found?”

She nodded. “We’d have to. There’s too much work to be done,” she said. “But why do I get the feeling you’re kind of hoping for that?”

“The sooner I’m back in the fight, the happier I’ll be. And it turns out that fighting Galra is enjoyable. They’re good opponents on the battlefield, even if they are honorless curs.”

“About that.” Vanorr turned to face Vecca. “You were exiled.”

“Yeah, yeah, and I’m leaving as soon as Voltron takes me out of here,” Vecca reminded her. “But if you want to kill me to prove a point…”

“That’s not it,” Vanorr said, shaking her head. “I would discuss some things with you.”

“I’ll leave you to that,” Allura said, eagerly grasping at the hope for conciliation between them. “I must check in with the Paladins on their search for Quinstead.”

She hurried out, closing the door behind her. She looked around for Shiro and couldn’t find him. He wasn’t in the hallway or downstairs, so she checked the Paladins’ room. He wasn’t there either. She finally found him in her room, speaking quietly on the comms.

“Shiro?” she asked, walking in and closing the door.

“They’re on his tail,” he said, turning to face her. “He fled the city, but he’s going to have a hard time hiding from our team.”

She grinned. “Now why would Quinstead run?” she asked rhetorically.

“Certainly not because he informed the Galra of Voltron’s location and was aware of the fact that they’d show up to conquer and enslave the rest of his people,” Shiro answered.

“You know, I have to wonder if he backed the alliance with the Galra out of fear,” she mused. “G’roknar and Vanorr would have been eager to fight.”

Shiro nodded. “Quinstead probably saw their performance in that arena and decided it was better to give the Galra what they wanted rather than fight them. But, to be fair, he did talk them into not leaving troops garrisoned here. He got his people a pretty good deal, and better than most planets and peoples get.”

“And then we showed up.” Allura sighed.
Shiro stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. “Tired?”

She returned his embrace. “Extremely. But it may be a bit before we can leave.” She explained about the unanimity required for the shifting of alliances. “This place makes me long for home.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “It must be hard, not having Altea to go back to.”

“It is,” she agreed, looking up at him, “but when I said ‘home,’ I meant the Castle of Lions. Being with you and Lance and Keith and Hunk and Pidge and Coran and the mice. It feels like it’s been ages since we could laugh and joke and… and just be ourselves.”

He smiled softly. “I know what you mean.” He leaned in and she met him halfway. She lost track of time kissing Shiro, so she had no idea how long they’d been at it when the comms crackled into life.

“We’ve got Quinstead.” Keith’s voice said. “Bringing him back to Nekkel.”

“And I got to knock him out,” Lance declared.

Their kiss was broken when both of them snorted in mirth. It was nice to have that taste of home.

~End of Chapter 7~
I'm so sorry. This is short and it sucks but it wraps up the story and I will never, ever write to deadline again. >_<

Quinstead was bound to a chair with a rather large goose egg on his head. Shiro probably should have felt bad about that, but instead all he could think was, Good job, Lance. Vanorr, G’roknar, and Vecca were in here along with Allura and himself. The soon-to-be ex-Supreme Judge was not trying to escape. More importantly, he also wasn’t keeping quiet.

“The Galra showed up with an overwhelming force. Any Laconice could easily take out two dozen Galra troops; they outnumbered us 50 to 1. In a way, that was a good recommendation: they took us seriously. They knew what we were capable of and did not underestimate us. But the truth of it remained: we would be slaughtered, and any left alive would be enslaved. Discretion is, regrettably, sometimes the better part of valor.

“So we went through the motions as I arranged things. The commander I spoke with was eager not to have to spread Galra forces even thinner than they already were. A victory was a victory in her book, so we claimed this ‘alliance’ and they left us. Normally that would have been the end of that.”

“Until an actual threat to the Galra surfaced,” Vecca put in.

“Voltron,” Allura clarified.

Quinstead nodded. “I knew they would be interested, so I let them know you were here. The alliance did not require me to do so, but I did not want to be put in the position of angering the Galra by either breaking our alliance with them or also allying with Voltron. Better to be proactive.”

“And when they arrived, you fled.” Vanorr’s voice was dripping with disgust.

“What else could I do? I was hoping to be picked up by a Galra cruiser outside the city, taken away from here.” He straightened his shoulders and looked his former comrades in the eye. “I did what I did for the good of the Morashi people.”

“DISHONOR!” G’roknar roared.

“Hold on,” Shiro said. He stepped forward. “It’s true that he acted dishonorably, but his original intentions, at least, were in the best interest of your people. And, to be frank, your limited view of ‘honor’ has cost you good people and good fighters, like Vecca here.”

“And what would you have us do with him?” Vanorr asked. “Welcome him back with open arms? He deserves death for his betrayal.”

“I have to go with them on this one,” Vecca said.
“No one asked you,” G’roknar snarled at her.

“Shiro.” Allura was tugging him back a little. “Their ways are different than ours, but we can’t force them to change.” She cleared her throat to address the Councilors. “What you do with Quinstead is your decision. But here is ours: we will not ally with you so long as you exile people because of love and dedication to others. We will not ally with those who enslave other races. And, I might point out, the Galra Empire is going to hear about what went on here. This will not be the last you see of them.”

“Let them come!” G’roknar declared. “We’ll give them the same good fight we gave them this time!”

“But with fewer people,” Vanorr observed. “Because you will take with you any who wish to actively join the Coalition, yes?”

Allura nodded. “Yes.”

She was quiet a moment and then looked to Vecca. “I have told you my decision. The rest is up to you now.”

“Vecca blinked. “But… there is not a complete Council. How can I…””

“All the Lycurs were wise enough to include emergency rules. I am invoking them now.”

“What?” G’roknar growled. “You would have to defeat me in combat to…” They shut up as a sword appeared at their throat.

“Yield. I’ll have your neck run through before you can do anything else,” she said, staring them down from the other end of her blade.

“I’ll make you pay for this.”

“I’m sure you will. We’ve known each other a long time; I know you keep grudges. Yield.”

“I yield.”

Vanorr lowered her sword, and Shiro lowered (and deactivated) his arms. She looked to Allura. “Vecca and I have spoken. She wishes to go with you, to fight the Galra. I would have her be our liaison.

“You are right, Princess Allura, when you say that you cannot change us. And the Black Paladin is right when he says that our current system would have seen us undermanned and likely defeated by the Galra invasion. I cannot know what changes will occur, or how. We are not a people fond of change.

“So my proposal is to take Vecca and anyone else you wish to with you, but give us a way to keep in touch. Perhaps we will contact you for an alliance someday. We… might even need to ask for help.”

G’roknar was bristling at that last sentence.

“But we have to at least try to do things our way first,” she finished. “And I will not have
you interfering in our sentencing of Quinstead. That, at least, is going to go according to the old ways.” The former Supreme Judge seemed resigned to his fate.


“It’s our decision. We’re going to do this the way we should, the way we always should have. And from now on, I am not going to let something like this change us, even temporarily.” She reached out and grabbed his hand. “We make decisions together, Shiro. And I am not your superior.”

She’s still angry about that? From back when we first arrived?! But then G’roknar wasn’t the only one to hold grudges. He cleared his throat and squeezed her hand. “I think their plan sounds good. We can give them an Alliance communicator, like we gave the Arusians. And we’ll still get more good fighters for the Coalition. And you’re right when you said we can’t interfere with their culture.”

“Then that’s settled.” She smiled at him before she turned back to Vanorr. “Agreed, then.”

“Agreed.”

It took a few quintants to get the word out: anyone who wanted to come fight with the Coalition was welcome, so long as they were willing to obey Coalition rules – like no slavery. All the exiles and slaves showed up, as well as a few of the Laconice and their families.

Quinstead was given a public execution that Shiro couldn’t bear to attend. Allura hadn’t really wanted to be there either, but she was “an aggrieved party,” and had to be represented somehow, she was told. She wasn’t going to make Coran or one of the paladins go in her stead. Not for this. But she closed her eyes before the final blow struck. Killing in war was one thing; this was quite another.

After that, Vanorr and G’roknar were hard to speak with. They were sequestered away with leading citizens of the city and even a couple of exiles – Vecca and Fewel among them – in discussions on how to proceed going forward. She didn’t get to see much of them, but it seemed like half the city could hear the yelling that went on in those meetings.

And, of course, one of the first things she’d done was go back to the guest lodgings and informed Pio, Meine, and Duerm that not only were they free to leave soon but that, in the meantime, Shiro would be staying with her in their room. The blush on his face as he’d tried to protest that (by mentioning the bed size) was adorable. Meine had just piped up that there was another room available with a larger bed, and Allura got to smile in triumph. More importantly, she got to hold Shiro as he fell asleep that night, and they both felt a lot better the next morning.

The Paladins were busy spreading the word throughout Morash and transporting people to the Castle. Other cities weren’t quite as welcoming, despite the news coming in from Nekkel. Still, there were plenty of slaves seeking freedom and plenty of other exile camps happy to find new homes and new opportunities to prove themselves.

The real surprise was the people who chose to stay behind. Not all the exiles – or even all the slaves! – would go. It seemed to drive Keith nuts, and Shiro had to talk him down from grabbing the people and hauling them off. “We’d be no better than the Morashi or the Galra if we took them away from where they want to be.”
Allura understood Keith’s desire but she also understood those who wanted to stay. Change was coming. It wouldn’t be easy, but the Morashi had never seemed the type to shirk. The slaves wanting to stay was a little stranger, but perhaps they’d found some silver linings worth staying for.

It’d been ages since the Castle was this full of life and noise and people. Just getting everyone on board was a task in and of itself. She personally made sure Pio and his family – he seemed to have adopted Duerm, or else there was something going on between him and Meine; she didn’t want to pry – got on board safely.

She invited them and Vecca to join her on the bridge for the launch and wormhole. Vecca asked if she could bring Fewel and Poula.

“Poula? I didn’t realize she was coming with,” Shiro said.

Vecca shrugged. “I guess she is. I’m not sure what to think about that, or about her. But the woman I loved all those years ago would have liked to see this wormhole thing. So I thought it couldn’t hurt to ask.”

Allura smiled. “She can come with you.”

The paladins were all in their places, Coran at his station. The Castle roared off through the atmosphere and, when they were a sufficient distance from the planet, Allura closed her eyes to concentrate her energy. She felt it connect and almost expand, as if it were rushing out through the universe. She heard their guests gasp.

They exited and Coran declared, “Welcome to Olkarion!” for the sake of the audience. He was in fine form, theatrical and dramatic. “Taking the Castle down.”

“Excellent. Shiro?”

He turned from his station to look at her. “Yes, Princess?”

“Come here, please.”

His brow furrowed, but he rose to walk towards the command station. “Yes?”

She sent her screens away as she pulled him in to kiss him. He made a startled “mmph!” of surprise before wrapping his arms around her. The paladins were laughing and she could practically hear Coran rolling his eyes. She just held onto Shiro tightly, never wanting the kiss to end.

“Oh, guess I wasn’t that wrong after all,” she heard Vecca mutter.

“Honestly, I would never have guessed,” Fewel said.

There was a significant cough that Allura didn’t recognize, but she figured it was probably Meine or Duerm.

None of that really mattered. When she pulled away, Shiro laid his forehead against hers. She’d never been much of one for public displays of affection before, but she was starting to change her mind. She loved Shiro, and she was okay with the entire universe knowing it, whether they liked it or not.
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