

Betrayal of Doom by catwoman

Part 4

Author's Chapter Notes:

Graphic violence. Character Death: We won't miss this guy! Word: "Hell". Dream sequence in italics - or is it real?

Stars careened past as the Lions hurled themselves through deep space, racing for home.

Aboard the Green Lion, Allura sat in a foldout seat near Pidge, listening quietly as he described the events that had followed her abduction.

When he had finished his story, he fell silent, looking at her intently.

She was lost in thought, staring gravely into the mug of steaming tea she cradled in her hands.

Unconsciously she brushed away a long tendril of hair that had fallen in front of her face, unknowingly exposing the fading bruise.

At the sight of it, Pidge felt anger well up within him; anger at the wrong done his beloved princess, at the needless pain she had suffered.

"Princess!" he cried, "If Zarkon comes near you again, he will pay!"

Allura's faraway look vanished, and she focused on her young rescuer's eyes of golden brown and saw the fire of revenge burning within them. She set her mug aside and closed her hand over his clenched fist.

"We can be sure that he will soon follow, and when the hour of our inevitable meeting arrives, we must be ready," she trailed off, pulling the blanket that Pidge had given her closer about her shoulders, a haunted look in her eyes.

Just then Lance's voice came over the radio. "We are now entering our home system. Arus will be in view shortly!"

After passing through the smoky violet gases of the Gamma Nebula, the ethereal blue-green world appeared before them.

Allura stood and gripped the back of Pidge's chair. Not long ago she had thought that she would never again see her home and the people she loved.

Pidge was relieved to see the troubled look in her eyes slowly replaced by the familiar glimmer of happiness.

A slow smile curved her lips.

“Home,” she said softly.

The two Lions began their descent through the atmosphere on a course for the darkened side of the planet.

As they flew over the Great Western Ocean, Lance radioed the Castle. “Castle Control, this is the Red Lion. Our mission has been successfully completed. We are making our approach and will see you soon!”

Their forward view screens lit up with Nanny and Coran’s overjoyed faces.

“Welcome home!” Coran called exuberantly. “We will be waiting for you at the main gates!”

The screen changed back to show low hill country rapidly skimming past beneath them.

Swiftly the Castle of Lions came into view in the fading twilight. Illuminated by the cool, silvery radiance of a waxing moon, the sleek fortress rose gracefully above the shadowy forest and stood out against the darkening sky shimmering with specks of golden light.

As the Lions landed, a group of people rushed forward. Allura, Pidge, and Lance stepped down from their ships and into the waiting arms of their friends.

Nanny flung her arms around Allura, tears of joy falling from her eyes.

“My Allura! My Allura!” she cried over and over.

Coran stood close by, his arms around both of them.

Keith and Hunk, now fully recovered, joined the happy group.

Seeing them both well, Allura sighed with relief and took their hands in hers. “My friends! I am so glad to see you are all right!”

Hunk put up his hand. “What’s more important is that you are back home with us!” he said, smiling widely.

“Yes!” Keith agreed, squeezing her hand and moving closer, hidden feelings flickering across his youthful face.

“Princess . . .” he began, his coal-black eyes looking deeply into her ocean-blue ones.

Sensing an undercurrent of urgency in his tone, Allura stood still and waited, the door to her heart cautiously unlocked. And for a moment the two seemed to be on the verge of a revelation, as if finally discovering that the wall that had stood between them all this time had only been an illusion.

Hunk held his breath.

There was an inner struggle, and as suddenly as it had come, the intense look in Keith's eyes was quickly withdrawn, forced away, and replaced by the familiar look of duty. He let go of her hand abruptly and stepped back, clearing his throat. "We must prepare for an attack from Planet Doom," he said crisply.

Behind them Hunk closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

After a moment's hesitation, Allura acknowledged his statement and turned back toward the rest of the group, her jaw set.

"Captain Akira is right. At this very moment King Zarkon is mobilizing his forces and will soon attack. The future of the free galaxy lies in our hands. Is Voltron ready to aid in our defense?"

Coran grimaced.

"Voltron is still nonfunctional, Your Highness," he informed her. "Technicians are working nonstop to complete repairs."

Allura tried hard to hide the disappointment she felt at hearing that news.

"Very well," she said calmly, "Let us go to Castle Control to continue our strategic planning."

And as she turned and walked briskly toward the castle with the others following close behind, Coran watched her with admiration. "King Alfor would be proud," he said softly to himself.

Later that night in her room, Allura lay bundled up in her blankets, watching the moon's slow climb into the eastern sky. Quiet pervaded the chamber save for Nanny's soft snoring from a nearby chair.

After preparing the castle as best they could for Zarkon's coming assault, everyone was urged to get some rest. Allura had wanted to stay at Castle Control to stand watch but was compelled to retire with the others due to Coran's gentle insistence. Reluctantly, she had left to get some much-needed sleep.

Now that she was alone with her thoughts, flashbacks of the traumas of the immediate past came flooding into her mind. Most were concerned with King Zarkon, but soon she found herself thinking of Lotor.

She felt at fault for his death. If she had not looked back, not allowed her need to look into those eyes one last time overtake her, Lotor wouldn't have been distracted from the fight and would have seen

the murderous guard make his move. She groaned softly and rolled over, turning her back on the soft glow of the moon.

Finally, as her eyes closed, a tear slipped away and disappeared upon her pillow.

* * * *

Eighteen hours from Arus, hundreds of heavily armed Drulean cruisers tore across the galaxy in pursuit of the princess. Their blunt, dark hulls shone dully in the luminous light of the surrounding stars. Bristling with a variety of deadly weapons, each vessel was capable of annihilating all surface life of a class M planet like Arus within a few hours.

At the formation's center, one ship stood out from all the others. It was blood-red in color and bore the insignia of the king: the skull of a jawless horned demon.

Aboard his gleaming flagship and seated high above his flight crew, King Zarkon stared intently at the star map displayed on the console before him. One clawed hand tightened into a fist as he watched two blips of light reach the outer atmosphere of the blue-green world.

He drew in a hissing breath. "So, you've reached your home, child of Alfor. Enjoy it while you can. Your race is about to meet its end!"

Back at Castle Doom, in the shadowy darkness of the silent bridal suite, a stooped figure in coarse brown robes moved quietly among the dead. Carefully avoiding severed body parts and sticky gore, it finally came to a stop over the body of the fallen prince.

Witch Haggar looked down upon Lotor's lifeless shell, her amber eyes glowing fiercely. The prince's face was frozen in a look of disbelief, his mouth slightly open as if there had been something he had wanted to say.

During her return trip from Arus, Haggar had entered a deathlike sleep known as the

"Trance of Knowing," in which she could discover unfolding events on Planet Doom to use to her advantage. She was not altogether shocked to learn of Zarkon's treachery, but Lotor's death was an event for which she was unprepared. For many years she had been loyal to the king, but she was no fool. She had known from the time of Lotor's birth that an heir had been born who would one day usurp the old king's power and extend the rule of the Drule Empire farther than his father had ever dreamed. It had long been her intention to align herself with the ambitious prince. Evidently Zarkon knew this in his heart as well and seized the opportunity to be rid of this combined threat.

Haggar slowly knelt beside the still form of the man to whom in life she was truly loyal. "I felt your death cry as only I can. Your soul is safe! I caught it before it slipped away forever!"

Her gaze fell to his torn chest, now almost white from blood loss. She bared her sharp teeth. "Revenge! You want revenge! And I will help you get it!"

With that she brought the head of her wooden staff to rest above his lacerated heart, closed her eyes, and began to whisper.

Slowly the staff's head began to glow a greenish white. Shadows in dark corners stretched across the floor, drawing near to their mistress. With each breath Haggar took, the staff pulsed more brightly, throbbing with every spoken syllable. From the gathered shadows a chorus of disembodied voices echoed her spell. Haggar turned her face skyward, chanting shrilly, the ghostly voices rising into a roar, shaking everything within the room.

Slowly the dagger wound closed, leaving a jagged scar that soon faded away. Seeing this, Haggar ceased her chant abruptly, raised her staff, and sharply struck Lotor's chest.

A blinding flash of light and a crack of otherworldly thunder shook the room. His body shuddered violently, its empty lungs drawing in ragged gasps of the chamber's stagnant air. The reawakened heart pounded unevenly, staving off death's icy grip. As Lotor's breathing and heart rate slowed to normal, Haggar pulled her staff away, stood, and moved back, her bony frame quivering with excitement and exhaustion.

Lotor's eyes rolled back beneath their closing lids. After a moment of rest, his eyes flicked open, and he lay for a time, blinking through the unfocused haze of his vision. Suddenly he sat up and looked around in wonderment, his wild gaze finally coming to rest on Haggar.

"I was killed!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, my Prince. I have restored you," she said, bowing deeply.

"Where is my father?" he demanded, springing to his feet.

Haggar backed away slightly. "He has left with his fleet for Arus."

Lotor looked at her sharply. "Then Allura has escaped?"

"Yes, yes! She is back on her homeworld!"

Lotor seized the old crone's arm. "I need your help!" he said quickly.

Haggar smiled. "You will have more than that!"

* * * *

Zarkon's attack came just before dawn. Brutal and relentless, the Drulean battle fleet battered the castle and surrounding countryside from a position just above Arus's outer atmosphere.

A few hours earlier Princess Allura and the rest of the castle's inhabitants had awakened to a proximity alert indicating that the enemy fleet was drawing near.

Allura had hastily dressed in a pink jumpsuit, pulled on a pair of boots, and rushed out of her room, binding her hair up with a couple of combs. Nanny was right behind her.

The princess now stood in Castle Control watching the main view screen as her homeland fell under the ruthless assault of the dreaded King of Doom.

Early on she had ordered the evacuation of all civilians into the shelter of underground caves far below the castle. She also called in her ground troops, as it was quite plain that they had no chance of survival out in the open. Within minutes after the attack began, their ranks had been horribly decimated.

Coran turned toward her from his station looking grim. "Princess, our shields will not withstand much more of this pounding."

"How much time do we have?" she asked quietly.

Coran sighed, "One hour at the most."

"Do the others know?"

"Yes. Keith, Hunk, and Lance have positioned themselves on the main level with a detachment of armed men to watch the east doors. That is where I suspect Zarkon will try to enter. Pidge is down in maintenance helping with the repairs on Voltron." He paused, shaking his head. "It will take nothing short of a miracle to get us out of this one."

At last the shields gave way, enabling Zarkon's gunners to destroy the castle's power supply. The eastern doors' electronic locks became useless. Keith and Hunk hastily slid a massive titanium bolt across the portal, hoping to buy more time. In the red glow of emergency lighting, security personnel rushed frantically to assist in what looked to be Arus's last stand.

The fleet suddenly ceased firing, and as Allura, Coran, and Nanny hurried down a darkened flight of stairs, they saw from a window Zarkon's flagship, escorted by four troop transports, touching down outside the main gates.

Dirt swirled violently about the king's ship as it settled to the ground with a final blast of reverse thrusters, its heavy landing gear sinking deep into the soft, grassy earth. The massive dreadnaught faced the castle, the color of its hull resembling dried blood under the morning sun.

With a high-pitched whine the craft's formidable array of guns was swiftly trained on the castle. The main hatch opened, a ramp was lowered, and within seconds a large company of heavily armed Drulean storm troopers sprinted through the eastern gates. The troop transports opened as well, releasing more soldiers who ran swiftly, surrounding Allura's ancestral home.

From inside the fortress shots were fired through small defense slots at the onrushing invaders. Lance's skill as a marksman felled many, but still they kept coming.

As Allura and the others reached the main level, a harsh voice erupted from a loudspeaker aboard Zarkon's ship. "This is Zoor, Commander of the Drulean War Fleet! Cease all resistance at once, and open in the name of your conqueror, King Zarkon!"

The only reply from the castle was a fierce renewal of firing.

Commander Zoor looked up at his king, who had changed into his own battle armor and stood by watching.

"Use the Nova Cannon - I want this finished!" the king ordered.

"With pleasure, my Lord," the commander said, bowing. He then turned and signaled his chief weapons officer.

Zarkon drew his sword from the scabbard at his hip and swung it easily from side to side. The broad black blade flashed darkly under the harsh lighting of the bridge.

"Zoor, take as many of the Arusians alive as possible, especially the Voltron Force team. I don't care how many are wounded in the process, but leave the princess unharmed and apart from the others," he said, running his hand along the blade's razor-sharp edge, "Her punishment will be to watch the execution of her friends!"

Allura watched as the tall eastern doors shuddered against the pounding of Zarkon's Nova Cannon. With each pulse the metal turned redder and warped more and more

noticeably. She turned her eyes toward her countrymen, who grimly awaited the inevitable and last confrontation with the enemy.

Pidge had returned to the main level and now stood with the other members of the Voltron Force team, since time had run out for completion of Voltron's repairs. Each valiant member of the Force had a pistol drawn and was positioned among the castle guard awaiting the first rush of Zarkon's troops.

Holding a laser rifle, Coran crouched behind a pillar, Nanny at his side.

Suddenly a desperate thought flashed in Allura's mind, and she turned and rushed into a darkened corridor. Down an ancient flight of steps, through a winding passage, and into the silent crypt of the castle she flew.

This was where she came in times of desperation to beseech her father for advice. On past occasions his ghost had appeared, bringing comfort and at times solutions to impossible problems.

Her footsteps echoed in the silence as she approached the vault where her father lay in eternal rest. Beside his tomb was that of her long-dead mother. Far above, the muffled sounds of the cannon reached the gloom, causing her to envision a monstrous heart bending its entire will upon crushing the castle with its evil beats.

She fell to her knees before the tombs, lifted her face up, and called out, "Father, please help me! The enemy is at our gates, and Voltron is useless! What can I do to save our world?" Just then a tremendous crash rocked the vault, sending a shower of loose stones and dust upon her from the ceiling. Allura looked up, paralyzing fear gripping her heart. Soon she heard the faint sounds of many running feet, shouts, and gunfire.

"Zarkon has gotten inside!" she thought frantically, and her last ray of hope faded. Resigned, she bowed her head and closed her eyes.

Slowly a soft glow began to illuminate the room, and the sounds of the battle faded away. A peaceful quiet fell around the princess, causing her to look up. The light gradually brightened until she had to shield her eyes from its radiance.

At last she was able to withstand the glare and saw two luminous shapes standing tall before her. As she gazed up, she recognized her father, resplendent in white armor, the sword of his fathers at his side. Locks of hair drifted gently around his ghostly countenance; the kind eyes she remembered so well gazed back at her.

To his right stood a beautiful woman dressed in a royal gown, her long soft hair falling over her shoulders to her waist. Her large eyes glittered as she smiled back at Allura lovingly.

"Mother?" Allura gasped.

The queenly apparition nodded slowly.

Allura was so enthralled by the vision before her that she did not notice the breathless entrance of her friends behind her, who stopped short, awestruck. All were witness to the incredible sight.

And time stood still.

Then King Alfor spoke, his deep, resonant voice filling the crypt.

“My daughter, Queen Sera and I have come to aid you in Arus’s most desperate hour. The greatest test lies ahead, but before you face our most hated enemy, receive these gifts.” He then inclined his head toward his queen.

Queen Sera gracefully moved forward and spoke with a voice that was like soft, sweet music on a gentle breeze. “Allura, my precious child, take my crown, and with it receive my wisdom and serenity as a shield against your opponent’s taunts and deceptions.” She raised her hand toward Allura, and a shimmering glow enveloped her daughter. A beautiful circlet of gold appeared upon Allura’s brow. Allura touched it in astonishment as the queen moved back.

Then Alfor said, “My daughter, take up my sword, and from it receive my warrior’s skill, courage, and strength.”

He then held out his sword to her, and she took it into her hands. Dazzling light seared the room. Allura’s pink jumpsuit turned to white, and the symbol of the Royal House of Arus, a gold lion in fighting posture, appeared over her heart. A sudden wind swirled about her, causing her hair to loosen and come down about her shoulders in brilliant curls like a lion’s mane.

She sank to one knee as the light and wind slowly faded away.

Sera and Alfor clasped hands and in a voice like thunder cried, “Rise, Allura, Queen of Arus. Go forth and vanquish Zarkon!”

Allura abruptly stood. Her eyes locked with those of her parents, and she thanked them and bowed. Then the ghostly pair vanished.

Allura turned toward the passage. Coran and the others fell back in awe as her calm gaze bent upon them. Somehow she seemed taller. Simultaneously each of them dropped to one knee.

“My Queen,” Coran finally spoke, “Your instructions?”

She stepped toward him. “We must return to the main level and drive Zarkon from this house. Follow me!” And with that she dashed past them and up the stone steps, the others following close behind.

“There you are!” Zarkon growled as Allura appeared at the far side of the room. He stood among the ruins of the great eastern doors and strewn bodies of Arus’s last defenders. A legion of his most ruthless warriors surrounded him, weapons at the ready. He inclined his head toward them, and they slowly advanced upon the small group.

At Keith’s signal, Hunk, Lance, Pidge, and Coran immediately surrounded Allura and Nanny.

But Allura placed her hand firmly upon Keith’s shoulder and moved past him.

"Prin-- I mean, Queen Allura!" he said in surprise.

She stopped and looked at him, "I must do this, Keith." She glanced at Zarkon's hulking form. "Alone."

Keith slowly stepped aside.

Zarkon watched Allura's approach with great curiosity. She walked steadily toward him, her clear eyes never leaving his face, her expression unreadable. In her small hand was deftly held a great broadsword.

"Surely she does not intend to fight me?" he thought incredulously. "What is that you have there, my kitten?" he asked in dark amusement, swaggering forward. "A weapon to raise against your conquerer? Your master?" he added dangerously.

Rude laughs erupted from his troops and echoed about the chamber.

Allura stopped a few feet away from him and said in a voice that was thin and cold, "I will not allow my home to be desecrated by your foul presence. You and your army of scum will not be tolerated here!" And with that she brought up her father's sword.

Taken aback, Zarkon stood in disbelief, gaping at his small opponent. Allura was half-crouched, her sword leveled at him, her eyes glinting like steel. And for an instant the unaccustomed sensation of fear washed over him, and he hesitated. Then, as if shooting up from the nethermost regions of Hell itself, his temper exploded! How dare this girl talk to him in this manner and in front of his men! He would make an example of her to them all, and later, in private, he would be sure to exact payment in full for her insolence!

Slowly an unpleasant smile twisted his rough features. "I accept your challenge," he snarled and slowly drew out his sword.

* * * *

So distracted were the men of the Drulean fleet by the duel ensuing below on the planet that they were utterly taken by surprise when thousands of sleek battleships suddenly warped undetected into the area and surrounded them.

The dagger-shaped ships were unknown to the Drules and were both beautiful and deadly as they gleamed under the far-reaching light of Arus's sun.

Attempting to warn their comrades below, Zarkon's fleet commanders soon discovered that all communications equipment was completely jammed.

The Drules prepared to fire at the invaders, but before their weapons could fully charge, half their fleet was destroyed by a blinding ray of blue light that originated from a massive cannon located upon the mysterious fleet's flagship.

The remainder of Zarkon's ships lost power and quickly switched to faltering backup systems.

Amid the confusion and frantic shouts, the main view screens of the helpless cruisers flickered suddenly to life, the image of a pale blue face framed with long white hair appeared, striking complete and utter terror into disbelieving Drulean hearts.

This new conquerer, apparently returned from the dead, held their eyes long with his piercing, luminous stare, and then bared his fangs in a terrible smile.

* * * *

Metal clashed violently as Allura deflected another of Zarkon's crushing blows.

At first, to humor his men the alien king had brought up his sword with the playful intent of disarming her, but he soon found that that was not as easy as it had seemed.

He then began to recount aloud his attack upon her in Lotor's bridal suite in an effort to churn up the fear that had been so plain upon her face then. His lewd remarks enraged her friends, but she simply ignored him.

And as the fight wore on, his desire to reclaim her became eclipsed by rage at his embarrassment.

A defeat by an off-worlder, especially a female, was unthinkable; but now, judging by the uncertain looks exchanged by his troops, it seemed likely to some.

With his frustration and anger boiling over, he attacked viciously, not caring anymore if he caused her serious injury or death. He could do without her if he must!

Allura, on the other hand, had the sensation of watching the fight from afar, so calm were her thoughts and single-minded her purpose. She evaded the evil king's lunges effortlessly, slowly drawing him toward the gaping hole where the eastern doors had once stood. She wanted to lead him outside where his blood would not defile her home when finally spilled.

Keith, Hunk, Pidge, Lance, Coran, and Nanny followed, as the two combatants eventually moved out into the late morning sun. Zarkon's soldiers came out as well, mesmerized by the fight.

No one noticed as a new flagship and escorts decloaked on the ground just beyond a nearby hill.

Soon Lotor's tall figure emerged from the central command ship. He was clad in polished black armor that flashed in the sun, upon his head was a helmet of the same shining metal, and encircling this at his brow was a three-pronged crown of gold. His long, pale locks flowed down his back, resembling spun silver in the morning light. From his shoulders hung a long cape of deep red that swirled fitfully in the rising wind.

With laser sword in hand, he swiftly descended from his ship and made his way toward the Castle of Lions, uncounted ranks of warriors at his heels.

The day was growing hot, and Zarkon gasped harshly with exhaustion. His heavy armor was beginning to weigh noticeably on him. There were uncomfortable mutterings among his men, who watched uneasily as his strength began to ebb.

The old king stood at bay, his back to a fountain, facing Allura, who was also starting to show signs of weariness. Beads of perspiration spotted her brow, and her shoulders heaved with each breath she took. The sword fight had been going on for almost an hour, and no victory had been achieved.

Suddenly, Zarkon thrust his sword toward Allura's heart, and she dove to the right, just missing being run through.

As she fell toward the pavement, she swung her sword across to the left, completely severing the king's left arm and catching a seam in his armor, her sword biting deeply into his unprotected side.

Dropping his sword with a loud clang, Zarkon staggered backward, snarling in pain, holding the bleeding stump with his right hand, and fell to the ground.

He clutched at his ruined arm and slashed side, trying to stem the dark blood that welled up from the wounds.

His soldiers cried out in unison as their king, Zarkon the Invincible, lay at the mercy of the slender Arusian girl. They instantly drew their weapons and took aim at her.

Allura quickly brought the point of her sword to the king's throat, daring them to fire.

Zarkon glared up at her with undying hatred in his bloodshot eyes. He tried to rise but fell back with an involuntary cry of agony.

Allura glanced at him, a flicker of pity crossing her face.

Zarkon saw this and suddenly changed his expression to one of atonement.

"Please, Your Highness!" he begged, "Spare me! We will leave your planet in peace, if only you will allow me to live!"

"No! It's a trick!" Pidge yelled from nearby.

Zarkon clenched his teeth, holding back a scathing torrent of obscenities.

He kept his eyes riveted on hers. "Please . . ." he hissed.

For an instant Allura faltered, imagining life without Doom's attacks, but just as she was about to lower her sword, her mother's voice came flooding into her mind: "*Allura...Beware!*"

Allura then pressed the blade more firmly against his throat. "No, Zarkon, you are not to be believed. You will order your men to drop their weapons and surrender to us!"

Before Zarkon could reply, a commotion erupted inside the eastern gates. There were shouts and sounds of laser fire, then silence.

Everyone looked up in surprise as a familiar figure stepped into the stone courtyard and moved rapidly toward them.

Allura stared in disbelief. Prince Lotor, whom she had thought slain, was alive and well and walking briskly toward the fountain, his face filled with apprehension. He exhaled visibly when at last his searching eyes fell upon her.

Zarkon craned his neck to see who the visitor was and recoiled violently at the sight of his son.

Lotor now stood over him and glared down at him in disgust. "Well, it looks as though you have gotten most of what you deserve."

"How . . ." Zarkon gasped, then stopped as Witch Haggar appeared by Lotor's side. She looked tired and seemed to have grown older since the last time he had seen her. Evidently her aid to the prince had strained her greatly.

"I should have known," he growled. "I knew you would betray me eventually!"

Haggar smiled and bowed. "I cannot deny where my loyalty lies. Your reign is over. Today begins a new era, and with it there must be a new king!" She turned and raised her staff toward Lotor. "All hail King Lotor!"

Lotor's men, who had surrounded Zarkon's remaining guard, gave out a raucous cry of salute.

The defeated king looked around in amazement at Lotor's army. They were Drulean but seemed larger and more savage than his own men.

Guessing his father's thoughts, Lotor smiled, "These men have been enhanced by Haggar's robeast technology. For years, we have kept them hidden, increasing their numbers and building a new, indestructible fleet! I had intended to put them to use one day, but your murderous plans for me accelerated their activation."

Zarkon grimaced and fell back against the fountain, clutching his wounds.

Lotor then looked at Allura, his smirk fading.

She still stood with her father's sword pointed at Zarkon. She seemed even more beautiful than the last time he had seen her, just before the guard had struck him down at Castle Doom. Shyly she returned his gaze, and for a moment he thought he caught the hint of a smile.

Zarkon, watching their silent exchange, saw his chance, grabbed his sword and sprang up at her. Nanny, Pidge and Lance screamed her name, Keith rushed forward and Lotor turned, eyes wide.

But Allura's blade swept through the air and sliced cleanly through the evil king's neck. The next instant the decapitated body crashed heavily to the ground, its head rolling across the stones and finally thudding to a stop against a wall, an ugly scowl frozen forever upon the fiendish countenance.

One of Zarkon's guards rushed at Allura's back with a knife poised for the kill, but Lotor hooked an arm around her and pulled her away just in time. He then spun and dealt a deadly blow with his sword. The guard's lifeless body fell in a heap at his feet.

Seething with rage, Lotor advanced upon the remainder of Zarkon's men. "Who's next?" he roared.

The frightened guards fell to their knees, pleading for their lives. And after a moment, Lotor sent them away to his ship with an escort of men.

He then turned back toward Allura, who was now surrounded by her friends. She had cleansed her sword beneath the flowing waters of the fountain and then laid it upon the structure's edge. She now stood facing him, quietly waiting. Some of the others, especially the black-haired VF leader and the old man and woman, eyed him with extreme distrust.

Lotor looked away from them and up at the battered castle, the blue sky, the drifting clouds. He breathed the fragrant air and listened to the chirping birds hidden high up in the trees. His gaze returned to the waiting group and the golden-haired woman at its center. This place was a paradise, but only because *she* was here.

The planet Arus and its queen, for he knew in his heart that that was what she was now, were his if he wished. And he so did wish!

At his command was the most powerful fleet in the galaxy, and this world now lay on a silver platter before him. A voracious light sparkled in his eyes, and it was a terrible moment for all.

Then, after an inward sigh, he ordered his troops to retrieve his father's body and return to their ships for immediate departure. Haggar looked up at him in surprise, as did Allura and the others.

Lotor shrugged and flashed a familiar grin. "Conquering a planet is no fun without a challenge," he said humorously, winking at Allura. "I think I'll come back when Voltron is back in action."

His look then became serious, and he moved closer to her. He held her eyes with his searchingly. "My Queen, will you come?" he asked, in a voice meant for her ears alone.

Allura felt the impossible pull of two worlds and at last lowered her eyes and shook her head.

Then the disruptive noise of Coran clearing his throat broke the silence.

Lotor looked up in annoyance to see several frowning faces staring back at him. He turned his back on them and took Allura's hand in his and kissed it tenderly. He gave her one last look of longing, and then strode from the courtyard back to his waiting ship.

Blinking back sudden tears, the young queen watched his retreating figure until it vanished from sight.

Later, aboard his flagship, Lotor watched as planet Arus turned slowly beneath him. The region where Allura's castle stood moved slowly under the cloak of night.

The King of Doom sat motionless, lost in private thoughts.

"Your orders, Sir?" came the fleet commander's hesitant voice, loath to distract his king and possibly incur his wrath.

"Take us home, Captain," Lotor replied softly.

"Aye, Sir," said the commander, much relieved.

As his fleet turned away from Arus, The young king switched his console view screen to 'Aft View'. He then sat back in his command chair, gazing at the blue world that grew smaller with each passing moment as his ship accelerated to warp speed.

His mind was filled with Allura's haunting image.

He sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

"Goodbye for now, Queen Allura, Lioness of Arus."

Epilogue

Two months had passed since the death of King Zarkon. Voltron had long since been repaired and was ready for action at a moment's notice. Most of the restoration of the Castle of Lions had been completed, and the remaining scars upon the surrounding landscape from the desperate battle softened with each passing day.

A coronation had been held for Allura, officially announcing to the galaxy that she had ascended the throne as Queen of Arus. Immediately after, she had held a ceremony celebrating the courage of all who had fought for Arus's freedom and for those who had paid the ultimate price for their beloved world. Although happy to be home, Allura grew more and more distant from the others. She spent much time alone in the royal garden or out in the nearby forest, walking its quiet paths.

The Voltron Force team was concerned about her and offered various distractions to bring her out of her self-imposed solitude. Most of the time, however, she would thank them kindly and return to her private pursuits.

One evening, after she had excused herself early from supper, Hunk's anxieties about her behavior could no longer be contained. "I'm very worried about Allura! She hasn't been herself since Lotor returned to Planet Doom!"

"Do . . . you think she wanted to go with him?" Pidge asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

Nanny looked at him, horrified, and a heated argument broke out around the table.

Coran and Keith sat silently.

As the debate began to degenerate into shouts, Coran finally spoke, his calm voice rising above the din, compelling peace. "I believe that whatever feelings Allura may have for him must and will be resolved by her when she is ready. She has been through a lot. She needs time to sort things out."

After a heavy silence, everyone slowly returned to the meal.

Keith sat with his hands folded in his lap, his food untouched. He looked across the room to the lofty staircase that the queen had ascended a short while ago and lowered his eyes.

It was late when Allura finally retired for the evening. She had been in her room since leaving the dinner table, pacing the floor restlessly. Every now and then, she glanced at her fastened balcony doors as if expecting something...or someone.

No, it was not the work of a spell, but the anguish of a troubled heart.

And as the uneventful evening deepened so did her feeling of despair.

Finally, she took down her hair, changed and got into bed. With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes and soon drifted off into sleep.

"Allura. . ." a voice in the darkness called.

She turned onto her back and opened her eyes.

"Allura, my love. . ." called the voice again softly.

She got up and went to her balcony and found the doors slightly open.

As she stepped out into the cool night, an early fall wind smelling of chimney smoke and dried leaves blew gently about her. She breathed in the aroma and gazed down at the sleeping world, feeling a hollow pang of loneliness.

The garden below was cloaked in mist, and the distant forest stood out against the starry sky etched in silver.

*"My Queen . . ." the voice whispered behind her.
She turned suddenly at the sound.
The King of Doom stepped out of the shadows and into the starlight. His long white hair looked almost ghostly against the dark cloak that he wore.
Her breath caught in her throat, but not from fear.
Entranced, she watched him move toward her, his gaze intense with the unbearable weight of unfulfilled desire.
And as Allura gazed up at him, she suddenly realized that he was trembling, for he was offering her his most fragile possession: His heart.
And time stood still.
"Yes," she thought as she reached for him.
And with a barely contained gasp of joy, he took her in his arms and brought his lips to hers.
She returned his affection in full, finally letting go of reality's stifling restrictions.
They held each other close for some time sharing caresses, their soft laughter drifting upward to mingle with the stars.
Eventually they parted.
From inside his cloak Lotor brought out a single long-stemmed rose and gently pressed it into her hand, slowly stepping away as he did so.
He smiled at her, a smile tinged with pain barely concealed upon the handsome features of his face.
Then like a dream he faded away into the night.*

Allura awoke and sat up abruptly, her eyes searching her room. Her gaze fell upon her balcony doors: they were closed and locked, just as they had been when she had fallen asleep the night before, for now it was morning.

With the hope in her heart fading, she arose from bed to prepare for another day. She had gone just a few steps when she noticed something sparkling on the floor in a pool of sunlight.

Looking down, she was astonished to see a long-stemmed rose lying at her feet. She picked it up and gazed at it in wonder.

It was marvelous to behold!

Perched upon the crystal stem was a delicately crafted bloom of diamonds that glittered brilliantly like a night sky filled with stars.

She turned it slowly in her hands, a surge of happiness suddenly sweeping over her. Smiling, she held it gently to her heart.

The End