

Love Is Stronger Than Death by Purrsia
Chapter 4: Sweet Bird of Truth

Keith had known the odds were going to be stacked against them, and as the sunrise started to break over the mountains, he was surprised they'd lasted through the night. He was now grateful he'd gotten that extra rest for it turned out he needed it. Zarkon's forces, led once again by his wicked son, had been pouring it on all night without mercy. He'd expected to see a robeast at some point, but so far, they hadn't launched one. Perhaps they thought they could take the four Lions and the Castle without one, figuring the robot fighters were easier to replace than something they poured a ton of lazon into, siphoning precious rare resources. Sort of the same reasoning they had for holding off on the blazing sword until it was absolutely necessary. It was rather universal that great shows of power always came at some cost. It was one of few laws both sides understood.

It was a merciful break in the action that allowed Keith to ruminate on such things, and he sat in the seat of his Black Lion observing the smoldering countryside that the coming daylight was revealing. They'd had some setbacks, but they were still kicking. For one thing, news got back to him that the fleet Galaxy Garrison had sent to escort the new pilot had lost contact with them, and it was strongly suspected that Mogor's fleet had given them trouble if not completely blasted them out of space. The only positive out of that situation was that Doom's forces were split up – had Mogor and Lotor hit them with combined firepower, their circumstances would have been far more dire by now. But then, now it was only a matter of time before they regrouped and did just that.

On top of that, Bandor had arrived to provide much-needed backup, but Lotor soon put an end to that by using Romelle's life as incentive for Bandor to back off. Keith understood and he also did not want to see Romelle harmed. But on the other hand, if Arus fell there was no telling what fate would befall Romelle, Pollux and anyone else in the galaxy that would not bow to Zarkon's demands. It was a tough position to be in.

Lance came over his intercom, snapping Keith out of his grim thoughts. "Looks like we drove them back, chief," Lance noted with much hope, though Keith remained markedly skeptical.

He was just about to vocalize his doubts when Keith saw on his monitor a robeast burst from the ground, inadvertently knocking Lance's Red Lion out of the sky as it rose.

Lance's Lion crashed near the mausoleum and Keith could not raise Lance on the intercom or visually. Even worse, the Red Lion lay out in the open, exposed for anything to attack it. He ordered the remaining team to draw the robeast away and cover for him as he went to investigate.

Keith knew he'd have to go on foot. If Lance were hurt too badly, he'd have to get Red Lion out of the open and Lance back to the Castle for help. First, he landed Black Lion in the woods behind the mausoleum knowing the trees would provide his Lion some cover until he could

come back for it. Keith went outside and prepared to make the trek to Red Lion, which lay just over the crest of the hill. The sky became filled once again with enemy fighters, and Keith knew he had his work cut out for him. He'd be very vulnerable once he emerged from the forest, and planned to try to make it to the mausoleum first. At least it seemed the robeast hadn't noticed the inadvertent fate it'd handed Red Lion and was content to pursue the others away from the area. That was some small consolation. Although it was obvious that none of them could provide any cover for him – Keith was on his own now.

Taking a deep breath, Keith dashed out from the safety of the forest and ran for the mausoleum. He was nearly there when a distinct shadow passed overhead. He glanced up and noted to his dismay the unmistakable shape of Lotor's ship, which resembled some sort of sleek, menacing bird. All hopes that he'd somehow go unspotted were dashed when the ship made a tight circle back around and began firing at him.

Sod and dirt flew up at Keith from the volleys, and he ran the rest of the way to the stone wall of the mausoleum in virtual blindness. When Keith reached the structure, he put his back up to it flat and tried to catch his breath. The firing had stopped, but not for long, for he spotted Lotor's vessel turning again to make another pass. He'd have to duck inside and try to weather the assault there and simply hope someone realized what was going on.

Keith ducked through the door just as Lotor unleashed his next attack. He barely had time to duck down in the corner when stained glass and pieces of casket started raining down from the blasts.

Bandor watched the scene unfold with mounting frustration. He'd been watching Lotor's movements from the sidelines ever since the Prince of Doom had dangled his gagged sister before him as incentive to behave, and felt helpless as Keith – on foot and so vulnerable – was under the gun. His hopes that Arus wouldn't need his help anyway were fast becoming dashed, and he was faced with an excruciating decision. Sacrifice Romelle to save Keith or risk Keith's demise, possibly meaning the fall of Arus and the rest of the free Denubian Galaxy and still be unsure of any of their fates afterward. After his family had been burned by Zarkon's promises before, it was hard to put much stock in Lotor's words that if he simply stood by and didn't assist Romelle would be spared.

He was young and not as experienced as many who held a similar station in the past, but even he could see the writing on the wall. They had to act and do so as a united front. He was sure that's what Romelle would have wanted, especially when he thought back to the urgency in her eyes and the vehement shake of her head when he reluctantly bowed to Lotor's threats initially.

"Men," he announced to the crew on the bridge of his ship. "I want a full-on attack of that ship." He indicated Lotor's fighter jet. "We've got to help Keith get out of there."

The crew exchanged worried glances.

“But sir,” one of them spoke up. “What about Princess Romelle?”

Bandor fixed the crewman with a fierce glare, and he could tell the man was immediately sorry for asking. “I’m well aware of the threat against my sister, soldier. But I think you know as well as I do that Lotor would likely not spare her regardless of what we do, so we might as well go out fighting.”

With no further argument, Bandor’s crew directed his ship toward the mausoleum on the hill and caught Lotor by surprise.

Even with his sister’s fate a question Bandor felt exhilarated to be striking back at Lotor, and he ordered his crew to keep pouring it on. He couldn’t see Romelle objecting to that, either, for who knows what she’d suffered at Lotor’s hands. This, as far as he was concerned, was vengeance for his entire family. He felt his resolve strengthened not to bow to the demands of Doom.

Just when it seemed they were about to blow Lotor out of the skies once and for all, a swarm of Doom’s robot fighters came up from behind and blew out his ship’s engines causing it to career out of control. They had enough height and momentum to clear the mountain range past the desert, but were losing altitude fast afterwards. Bandor could make out a sea below, bordered on all sides by steep rocky cliffs. They were dropping fast, and it was almost certain they would splash into the waters below, perhaps breaking apart in the process. It had all happened so fast, there wasn’t time to man escape pods. There was nothing he could do but brace himself and hope Keith had enough time to get to safety.

Keith looked up when the chaos around him died down. He was covered in broken glass and shredded wood, but otherwise okay. He quickly got to his feet and tried not to look directly at the caskets in the room, which were blasted apart and toppled. It was far too morbid, he thought, and besides he had to get to Lance. But then something he caught in his peripheral vision made him look anyway. He did a double take as he noticed no body among the still-fresh and fragrant blooms that had lined Allura’s final resting place. In contrast, the skeletal remains of her mother were indeed mixed in among the markedly more wilted blooms of her casket. Allura’s body – it was gone!

His lip curled in contempt to think someone would be as low as to rob the grave of the much-revered Princess, but to actually take her remains too? It was unthinkable as well as plain twisted.

The blast of engines drew Keith’s attention and he turned to see with measured relief it was Red Lion blasting off. Now all he had to do was get back to his Lion and help the others deal with that robeast.

As he dashed back to his Lion, Allura's empty casket nagged at his mind. For starters, he wondered why it was only Allura who was gone. Her mother by contrast was not only still there, but all the jewels she'd been laid to rest in were left untouched. If robbery was a motive, why not take those too? Plus, he kept coming back to what good kidnapping a corpse was to anybody. But there would be time to look into that once the threat of Lotor was taken care of, and so he shook the thoughts from his mind.

Once Keith took to the skies again, Lance filled him in on Bandor's efforts – which he had witnessed as he was coming to – as well as what happened to him afterward. Keith was about to change course to assist the fallen Prince of Pollux, but the robeast suddenly loomed large before him and would not be denied. For now, Keith had to hope that whatever powers from the beyond that may exist in the universe would be with the little Prince until they could get to him, for it was proving impossible for even one of them to slip away. As it stood, it would be a small miracle if the four Lions could cope with the monster before them.

Aching pain in his legs along with crashing surf stirred Bandor to consciousness. Light poured in through a gaping hole in the side of the ship, creating a swath of light, and he could see motionless crew all around. They appeared to be lodged next to one of the sea's steep cliffs from what he could see, but pretty far down – spray from the sea misted his face every time the surf crashed, and he knew at high tide whoever was left wounded but alive would be drowned if they didn't get help. For his part, he was painfully pinned under a console, and couldn't free his legs.

Bandor cried out, but only the surf replied with its monotonous ebb and flow. He was the only one in earshot awake – or alive, at worst – and he lay helpless in the semi-darkness pondering his fate. He fought back tears, determined not to break down like some boy. It hurt, and he was scared. And sure, there was nobody around to notice whether he cried or not, but Bandor fought it all the same. As he saw it, he had a lot to be proud of now and few regrets, although there were some things he would have liked to know such as Romelle's fate, and whether his efforts had saved Keith. At any rate, he'd tried his best and fought his hardest, and that he decided, was enough to be proud of.

The comfort of those thoughts faded, when his attention turned to someone coming around the corner of the hole in the ship. His stomach dropped to note it was two Doom robots followed closely by Lotor himself. Bandor fought in vain to move the stubborn console from him, but it was no use. He was hopelessly stuck and at Lotor's mercy.

"What have we here?" Bandor heard Lotor say as he approached. He couldn't see Lotor's face in the relative darkness, but he could hear the sneer in his tone.

Lotor paused and knelt beside Bandor, bringing his features into enough light for Bandor to really see him. "I'm not afraid of you."

Lotor cast him a look of false pity. "Who said you should fear me? I come as an angel of mercy," he added before rising to his feet again.

“Go ahead. Go ahead and pick on someone smaller than you who can’t even fight back now. I don’t care,” Bandor continued, a sense of defiance overriding any fear.

Sighing with mock impatience, Lotor responded icily. “The fact that you’re incapacitated matters little as you’re no match for me regardless. What, in fact, does matter is that I told you not to get involved, which you decided to do anyway.”

“What are you going to do with Romelle?” Bandor hated himself for his simpering tone, but he couldn’t help but ask about her.

Lotor moved enough for Bandor to see the scowl on his face. “What makes you think I haven’t already done something? At any rate, her fate is for me to relish and for you to never find out.”

Bandor grimaced. If Lotor had finished her off, his only comfort was to hope she was finally at peace. The next thing he knew, the flash of Lotor’s unsheathed laser sword lit up the damaged bridge. Bandor hadn’t enough time to utter any last words before Lotor put a swift end to his suffering.

*6 o'clock in the morning & I'm the last person in this plane
still awake
Y'know I can almost smell the blood washing against the shores,
Of this land that can't forget its past.
Oh the wind that carries this plane, is the wind of change,
heaven sent and hell bent!
Over the mountaintops we go, just like all the other GI Joes*

E-I-E-I---adios!

*This is your captain calling--"with an urgent warning"
We're above the Gulf of Arabia--"our altitude is falling"
& I can't hold her up--"there's no time for thinking"
All hands on deck--"this bird is sinking"*

*Across the beaches and cranes, rivers and drains
All the money I've made--bodies I've maimed.
Time warps but I seemed to know,
Just like any other GI Joe
Should I cry like a baby, or die like a man?
While all the planets little wars start joining hands,
Oh what a heaven--what a hell
Y'know there's nothing can be done in the whole wide world.*

*I don't know what's wrong or right,
I'm just a regular guy, with bottled up insides,
I ain't never been to church or believed in
Jesus Christ
but I'm praying that God's with you when you die*

--Sweet Bird of Truth, The The