

Love Is Stronger Than Death by Purrsia
Chapter 6: Disappointed

Sven lost the fight against his nodding head and gave into sleep. But there was a reason he always fought sleep and it didn't take long this time for the nightmares to begin. As much as his waking life had turned into the stuff of nightmares, he dreaded the dreamscape kind even more. For in those, he not only had to relive the daily horrors and indignities that now comprised his day-to-day existence, but he also had to face the scorn and shame of those who were his friends, as he imagined it. In his tortured mind, those who saw what had become of him were mortified. At least in the waking world, they didn't know yet which gave Sven an odd sort of comfort.

This dream started out much like many of them do, based in his reality. In the dream it was after Doom's surprise raid on Ebb, where he had been convalescing since his run-in with Haggar. Among the captives, he'd been tossed into the Pit on Doom, his tormentors satisfied to know he'd either die of his unhealed injuries or starve to death if the fall and the laser fire didn't do him in first. They didn't wait around like the first time the entire force had been captured and risk his escape.

The fall and the brutality, it had not done him in. But as Sven had wandered through the dark and dank catacombs beneath Doom's rocky surface, he was losing hope that there was any escape or rescue. He'd been forsaken by the Voltron Force, for surely, they must have heard about Ebb; must have known he'd been among those taken prisoner. They'd left him facing a slow, miserable death. There was the occasional bit of water to be found, however questionable its sanitation was, but there wasn't a scrap to eat. Not even roots of any kind.

He wasn't sure, maybe it had been weeks, maybe it had only been days. He'd really lost all track of time in the dark. All he knew was his loud insistent stomach told him it was well past time to fill it. And then he happened upon an area where light shone in – natural light – and he thought he was saved. But his elation soon turned to crushing disappointment to find a dead end blocked by iron gates. But through those gates he got a view of the Arena, where he and the others were supposed to make their last stand before, back when they first arrived in the Denubian. Well, he realized it would have been their last stand when he saw what happened there. Beasts literally tore slaves limb from limb, seemingly for the sole purpose of amusing the patrons in the crowded stadium. Sven had never seen so much blood. It was horrifying and yet, he could not look away.

And then, as one beast caught its prey and ripped it asunder close to the shadowy place where Sven stood, it happened. The fleshy arm of the unfortunate victim sailed through the bars and landed near Sven's feet. He knew he should recoil. He knew he should run away. Instead, he found himself reaching for the limb.

As unthinkable as it was, he'd found a way to survive but it came with a terrible psychological toll. It wasn't like he was killing them, he would tell himself. It wasn't like they minded the fact that their flesh kept his hunger at bay and kept him alive. They were gone, past the point of being helped and he simply had to do what he had to do to survive. But soon, he'd forgotten why he wanted so badly to cling to this life that was so miserable, so hopeless anymore. Every time he tried to let go, to let himself starve, his will to live overrode all conscientious efforts to undermine it. He was in a hellish cycle of survival and self-loathing, and still nobody came to help him.

The question of rescue was perhaps moot, for now that he'd done what he'd done to stay alive, how could he ever go to the surface and look anybody in the eye again? Sven felt he could not return home. Going back to a normal existence, feeling sane again for that matter, seemed so unlikely. One look at him and they'd know what he'd done, he was sure of it. The girl, he sensed she already knew. It confirmed what he feared when he sensed her fear; that even if he utilized the way to the surface he'd finally found, what was up there for him now? And this was why, even though he could attempt an escape himself, he did not. Sven remained locked in a hell worse than any physical prison.

Always the same dreams, where his mind forced him to deal with the horrors he tried desperately to forget when he was awake between gruesome meals. In this dream, he was eagerly gnawing away on the sinewy flesh on a human leg bone when the others came upon him, their smiles and joy at the reunion morphing into disgust and horror. They saw what a beast he'd become and wanted no part of him.

Sven woke with a start, and even in the dim light of the dying torch he could see his unwilling patient was gone.

He rose to his feet with a muted groan, the hard rocky surfaces of the Pits never very forgiving, and set out to find the foolish woman. Not that he cared much for her in particular. In fact, he had a hard time believing, despite her resemblance, that she was any cousin of Allura. Surely, he would have heard of such a woman in his tenure on the team. Her talk of royalty and a planet to rule sounded crazy to him, the irony of which didn't escape him. But he did have just enough humanity left in him to not wish upon her the fate he'd been dealt, or worse. He'd gladly show her the way out if she'd simply give herself time to heal first. Otherwise, she'd never make it on the surface. She...she still had a chance if she didn't blow it first.

Body after body passed by on gurneys outside the Castle of Lions, draped with white sheets, as they were ushered onto the waiting Polluxian vessel for their final trip home. One in particular was set apart from the others with the extra care taken in its handling and that, Orla knew, was because it was the Polluxian Prince underneath that sheet. Captain Keith stood stiffly

at her side, and if she could have read his mind, she'd have found they both agreed on one thing; there had been too much death in recent days, but the mood pointed to this as marking only a beginning if something wasn't done quickly to fortify their defenses.

Doom's name had never felt so apt, for Orla felt as though its oppressive shadow was eclipsing their every effort to recover from Allura's shocking demise. It wasn't until now that she fully appreciated the role young Allura had taken on. Not only was appreciation found in the differences between running a kingdom and that of running a planet full of kingdoms, but Allura had become a soldier too, directly taking on that which threatened her people. It was admirable, and Orla was ashamed to have ever thought the girl guilty of being too unrefined for a royal Princess. When she had visited the Castle after it was deemed safe to appear publicly following word that Voltron was back and Zarkon driven away, she had been inclined to agree with Nanny that the girl should focus on ruling with dignity more and romp around with space explorers less. There were fit young men about that could take her place, or so it seemed so easily resolvable at the time. Though it wasn't just anyone that could be trusted with the secrets of Voltron, which they'd almost learned the hard way when that Bokar poser showed up, or so she had been told. And yet, at the time, Orla was still more inclined to agree with Nanny and push for Allura's 'retirement' from the Voltron Force.

She could see clearly now why the Princess engaged in such unprecedented behavior and it actually spoke more to her character, not less of it. Orla had spent the time since Zarkon's first devastating raid cowering and waiting for a miracle while Allura – after losing her parents and almost her entire planet – worked to make that miracle happen. She let no obstacle become too great, stepping up as needed when a pilot needed to be replaced. Anyone else would have surely sank to their knees and thrown themselves on the mercy of their attacker. It was a grace that went beyond perfect posture and a regal air, and one the people of Arus were sorely missing in the days since Allura's passing. Indeed, what good was being a ruler if there was nothing left to rule? Such wise words spoken by a girl so young, Orla mused.

Orla was considering stepping in for her deceased niece in that regard, so moved was she. Could she – an older, and admittedly more sheltered woman of royal blood – learn to fly the Blue Lion? Like Allura, she had no prior piloting experience but thought she could learn. However, she worried, would she have what it took to stick with it? Even as inexperienced as she was, she knew it couldn't be easy. Coran barely managed, and he at least had some knowledge of the Lions and their inner workings. Besides, he was needed more at the Castle controls and her stepping up would allow him to do that. It was something she planned on discussing with the Captain, as soon as this unpleasant business was concluded.

She brought her attention to the Polluxian Ambassador as he approached following the loading of the final body. They got their formalities out of the way quickly, and Orla was at a loss for what else to say. She hadn't known Bandor well, but she could appreciate the sacrifice he'd made, along with the fact that Pollux lost much in first their alliance with Doom and now their fight against it. Their ruling house, if indeed Romelle had also met her end, was completely obliterated. Their world had to be devastated and vulnerable and her heart went out to them.

After a few awkward exchanges, and apologies for being unable to attend Bandor's formal burial due to their own dire situation, the Ambassador was on his way back to Pollux. Orla was upset with herself for lacking the graciousness to have come off better, but then, she had to allow herself to be human as well. The past days hadn't been easy on anyone and it was hard to feel graceful when one felt so numb.

She watched the ship ascend until it was but a black dot against the blue sky, before she turned to Keith who looked to be doing the same with his dark eyes to the sky.

"Captain, may I have a word with you?"

"Certainly, your highness," he replied, meeting her gaze.

She studied him, noting how drawn he appeared. Orla imagined he had quite a load to bear on his own shoulders and almost hated to heap more on with what was starting to seem like to her, a ridiculous request. True, she was the Queen now and she supposed she could order him and his crew to train her in the Lion. But she'd rather go in as a welcomed ally than some overbearing woman they resented from the start. Their chemistry as a team, she'd observed, was one of their strengths and she certainly didn't want to be the weak link in that chain.

"I know you've been trying to sort out who can permanently pilot the Blue Lion," she began. There was no point in dancing around it, she decided. "I propose that I train to be that pilot."

Keith's eyebrows shot up and Orla could tell he was trying but couldn't quite mask his skepticism and shock at the request. It took him a moment to recover enough to muster a response. "With all due respect, your majesty, it wasn't really the most ideal place for Allura..."

Orla scowled at the implication. "Allura made a fine pilot, and she was right – what good is being a ruler if you've nothing left to rule? You're going to have to train someone either way. Why not me?"

Keith flushed slightly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any disrespect to you or Allura."

He flushed brighter and looked away, and it was then that Orla realized why he felt that way about Allura in the Blue Lion. He cared for her, quite probably on a level that went beyond friendship. It was little wonder then that he seemed to take her loss the way he had. But surely, he had no such conflict of emotion for her. So again, she had to ask why she couldn't train as a pilot.

"As Captain of the team, I respect your judgment enough to want your input on this matter," Orla began, trying a different tack. "But also respect me enough to be honest with me about why you hesitate to accept my offer. I'm sure Allura proved well enough that my gender and station should have no influence either way."

Keith struggled and could barely look her in the eye when he finally answered. “You’re not Allura.”

Orla let out a slight gasp. She hadn’t meant to imply that she was going to replace Allura, or that she could even measure up in all ways. Some things, perhaps only due to her age and experience, she actually excelled in over her niece. But no, she hadn’t any expectations that this would be one of them. She was simply trying to follow Allura’s fine example and not just sit there waiting for Zarkon to bulldoze them out of existence.

As the moment slipped into insufferable awkwardness, she brushed past Keith and began to walk back over the bridge toward the Castle. His call gave her pause. She turned and waited for him to say whatever it was he had to say.

“Have Hunk and Pidge take you out on a test run. Best way to learn is hands-on.”

Her mouth hung open slightly, and she felt a shock of fear – and possibly excitement? – stab at her insides at this unexpected turn of events. Although she had thought he’d be the one to start her off.

“What about you?” she asked, once her senses returned to her. “Aren’t you going to take part?”

Keith shook his head. “I was going to tell you, I’m going to Doom on reconnaissance. With her majesty’s permission, of course,” he hastily added.

“You think this is wise?” she asked, to which he nodded.

He’d shown faith in her and this is how she thanks him, by questioning his decision? From what she’d heard and seen since the space explorers came to Arus and revived Voltron, she had no reason to doubt him at this point, and suddenly felt foolish for questioning him. Allura never had a bad word to report about them, and in fact only had glowing praise for the Captain of the team. Military strategy was definitely not her forte, besides.

“Very well then.”

At that, they parted ways each having an important task to focus upon.

Allura sat stiffly beside Lotor in the carriage, as it made its way across a valley between towering mountain ranges. The Doom terrain was uneven, and it made for a rough ride, but Lotor had insisted on making the journey in a horse drawn carriage supposedly for her benefit. It was a touch that reminded her of home, which he knew full well, and as such it made her rather heartsick. Being alone with Lotor, save for the robot guard that drove the carriage, did little to ease her mind either, and she wondered where they could be going. The night before, she scarcely slept worrying about it.

She'd seen little amid the fog and the mists other than the steep bluffs of the nearby mountains. It had crossed her mind that he was bringing her away from the Castle to have his way with her, but then that theory made little sense. Nobody in that Castle would care what he did to her, so seclusion wouldn't be a concern of his she was quite sure.

Allura startled when she felt his gloved hand envelop one of hers. She chanced a glance in his direction, and noted he wore a lopsided smirk and so quickly averted her gaze. Her stiffening didn't seem to dampen his enthusiasm.

"Allura," he intoned almost soothingly. "Don't be afraid. I promise you that you will be amazed at what you're about to see."

She swallowed hard and remained silent, unsure of his unspoken meaning. Instead, she chose not to meet his gaze though she could feel it heavy upon her. However, fate conspired against her when the carriage hit a particularly rough patch effectively tossing her into Lotor's lap. He snaked his arms around her waist to keep her close, and she barely noticed the ride smooth out and the fact that it had gotten considerably brighter outside, her mind more concerned with her proximity to the Prince of Doom.

Allura was horrified to see Lotor was intent on taking full advantage of her nearness as he leaned in for a kiss. His breath was heavy with the sweet scent of wine, for he had already had a fair share even as it was early yet. Instinctively, she struck him with her open palm just before his lips made contact with hers. She almost regretted the move when she saw the ire flare in his eyes, but it left him as quickly as it had come on. She felt lucky the extent of his reaction was to put a bit of distance between them and sulk a little.

"We're almost there," he said curtly.

Allura turned to look out the window in the carriage door beside her and her jaw went lax. They had descended down the mountain, and the gloomy fog was gone. There was actually sun lighting up a landscape she might have mistaken for Arusian if she hadn't known better. The only apparent difference was a purple haze to the sky rather than the pristine blue she would expect back home. It was surely a side of Doom she'd never seen before.

In the distance, she could see a glittering metropolis nestled in the fertile valley below, its structures literally sparkling in the sunlight. They seemed to be headed in that direction and Allura found herself wondering again what Lotor's game was.

Keith was aware of their eyes on him as he packed some last-minute supplies for his journey in the Castle Control Room. He glanced up from the knapsack he was stuffing items into to be met with Hunk and Pidge's anxious faces.

"Are you serious?" Pidge asked. "You want us to train *her*?"

"Why not?" he countered. "We'd have to train someone anyway and she offered. Best of all, we can trust her. Let her try. It can't really hurt and we certainly don't have any better options at this point. Let Coran ride along if it makes you feel better. Maybe the knack for picking up the finer points of piloting runs in the family."

Pidge showed what he thought of that by snorting. "No offence but Orla's old. And stuffy."

It was Hunk's turn to turn incredulous. "Old? I wouldn't call her old. Not like Nanny or Coran. But then, anyone is old to you, pipsqueak."

"You know what I mean!"

"Do the best you can," Keith urged. "We'll reassess things when I get back and we know better what we're going to be up against next. I have a feeling they won't just launch their stock attack. They're ready to play their ace and we've got to be ready to trump them. Can't count on that being Voltron, not with Lance ailing and the Blue Lion a question mark."

"If Lance is conscious," Pidge countered, "he'll be flying."

"That's what I'm worried about," Keith muttered. The move would be courageous and bold, but also risky. There was enough to worry about as it was without wondering if Lance could cope with another big battle. "Pidge, did you find out anything about the mausoleum from the locals?"

"Nuh-uh. Coran didn't want me to tell them why I was asking, though, but I think they suspect something's wrong. But boy, did Nanny freak out when she heard." Pidge grimaced at the memory.

More to sort out, but it was more that was going to have to wait. It still baffled Keith to think someone would take a dead body but he supposed, there were some strange people out there. Strange people that did strange things he'd never understand, and he was about to visit a planet full of those types.

His bag packed, Keith shrugged his arms into the straps and brought the launch bays up. It was time to go.

“Be careful, okay?” Hunk said suddenly.

Keith saw his hand come out, and though thinking it odd to shake as a departure, Keith took hold of Hunk’s meaty palm. He was surprised to find himself drawn into a hearty hug.

Pulling back, Keith eyed Hunk curiously. “I’ll be fine. Like I said, I don’t plan to be seen. And if I’m not back by this time tomorrow, you know something’s up. But don’t worry, I’ll be back. If any Lion can handle the electrical fields that surround Doom, it’s Black Lion.”

“I wish we could come, too. Ooooh, I’d love to deal with Lotor face to face.” Hunk smacked a fist into his palm for emphasis.

“Yeah,” Pidge piped up. “Just watch out for his rock sneak attack. Right Keith?”

Keith shot Pidge a warning look for bringing up what was a source of embarrassment for him, referencing as he did how the duel with Lotor he’d had some time ago ended. It was the last time Keith ever gave Lotor the benefit of believing he had any sense of honor about him.

Keith turned to go.

“Hurry back,” Pidge called after him.

Keith looked back and offered the boy a playful wink. “Sooner than you know it.”

Lotor extended his hand to help Allura out of the carriage. The Arusian princess was hesitant, but eventually took his hand and stepped out into the bustling street. He was delighted to see her shocked expression as she took in the finely dressed citizens milling about. If she only thought of Doom as gloomy fog, slave pits, and misery she just got her world turned upside down.

“I bet you didn’t know we carried on so normally. This is what real life on Doom is like,” Lotor boasted. “All of this could be yours too, and so much more...”

He studied her resulting scowl and thought she was holding back. “Dear princess,” he remarked dryly. “Do speak your mind.”

She glanced around and looked reluctant, but finally turned back to face him. “It all seems very nice,” she conceded. “Although I suspect it’s accomplished on the broken backs of slaves.”

There it was, he thought with aggravation, her judgmental dismissal. As though her servants and underlings were justified and his were not. “Sweetheart, we’re cut from the same cloth.”

Allura’s shocked gasp told him well what she thought of that.

“You deny that you have servants and surround yourself with the best finery, my dear?” Lotor challenged. “Besides, these citizens of Doom, they do not look unhappy or oppressed to you, do they? The slaves we have, they brought their misery down upon themselves. I can’t say the average Arusian has the same disposition.”

Allura scoffed with disgust. “It’s small wonder why. Your constant attacks have left my people demoralized and scarred.”

Lotor couldn’t help but laugh a little, which only incensed his beauty more. “Perhaps they’re a little slow then, on top of everything else. If they – and you – would stop defying my father, life would be easier for all of us Allura. Believe me.”

Allura’s jaw dropped. “You only see things your way, don’t you?”

“I’m in good company,” he shot back harshly. “You, who foolishly pine for some pauper of a pilot, but what can he give you, Allura? Surely, he can’t offer you this,” Lotor added, opening his arms to present the sparkling city for her approval. “You’re royal perfection, Allura, and it makes me ill to think you’d mix blood with someone so unworthy and pointless.”

It was Allura’s turn to laugh. “Keith, or any of the Voltron Force for that matter, is ten times the man you could ever be. For one, he’s yet to resort to kidnapping a girl in some crazy attempt to win her over.”

“It seems to me he wasn’t willing to do anything to show affection for you, Allura.”

Lotor stood in the street, seething with anger. The woman knew what buttons to push to infuriate him, that much was certain. If it had been any other wench speaking to him like that, he’d have smacked her down to the ground already, but Lotor controlled the urge to do so to Allura. Everything had happened like he wanted – she even stood before him looking exactly like she had in so many of his daydreams and fantasies about her – and yet she was still so far out of reach.

He had grand plans to give her a tour of the finer places in the city; a whole day where he’d hoped to impress and woo her to his way of thinking. But the urge to strike her grew the more she stood there staring him down so defiantly, and he knew he’d better walk away before he lost what control he had left.

“You,” he barked at the robot guard that had guided the carriage to the city. “Keep an eye on our Princess.”

“Yes sire,” came the flat, soulless reply.

With that, he stalked away down the street, his mind plotting for a way to reach her in time for his plan to come full circle and see Allura as his willing bride.

Orla sized herself up in the oval mirror, the pink trimmed space suit snugger in certain places than she cared it to be. She finally turned, unable to ignore Nanny’s overt sighs as the woman hovered nearby.

“Honestly,” Nanny intoned, “I don’t know why you’re doing this. First Allura insisted on risking her life in that silly machine and now you!”

“If you recall,” Orla replied calmly, “we didn’t lose Allura in the Blue Lion. For all our worries, we underestimated the random and deadly force of nature.”

Orla felt for the woman. Nanny was definitely the most outwardly devastated by Allura’s passing, no doubt blaming herself. But shades of the woman’s notorious nitpicking and overwrought demeanor were coming back to the surface, and out from the mire of her grief. Allura had not exaggerated a bit. Sure, Orla had seen it before, but it was quite another thing to be the actual object of Nanny’s consternation.

“Yes, but if we lose you there’s no more royal line. Do you know what that means?”

Orla looked at her levelly. “Nanny, I’m just a woman who was lucky enough to be born into high station. If I die, Arus will still keep turning. A new leader will emerge – they always do.”

Nanny looked unconvinced. “Yes, it’ll probably be that wretched Lotor taking over. Some life to live then.”

A knock sounded at the door, and it was immediately followed by Pidge’s head peeking in. “Ya ready?”

Nanny gasped sharply with indignation. “Young man, you do not enter a lady’s chamber without her first bidding you enter, and most definitely not her highness’ room!”

“Welcome back, Nanny,” Pidge said with a half grin.

“Out!”

Orla looked on the exchange with mild intrigue. The little one, it was nice to see him joking again. They'd begun their healing, she knew. It was actually a good sign to see this sort of thing going on; the sort of thing from her visits before that she'd come to know as the more normal goings-on.

"Nanny," she said, taking the woman gently by the shoulders. "I've everything to gain by trying this and nothing to lose. I promise you, it will be alright."

Romelle leaned heavily against the wall, gripping the ring of the candle-holder with the hand on her good arm. Her various injuries made the journey painful and arduous, but she was not content to lie around with Allura on the surface somewhere at the mercy of Lotor. It was clear the mystery man who had found her wasn't interested in helping her beyond some half-hearted attempts to patch her up, and likely only because as he'd said, he'd thought she was Allura. Although that fact made his refusal to aid her in helping Allura all the more baffling. At any rate, he made her uneasy. The man was brooding and wild-eyed. She didn't care to be around and vulnerable when he did snap, so she waited until he fell asleep to slip away.

Drawing in a deep breath, she forced herself away from the support of the wall and took hitching steps forward. She had no idea where she was going in this underground labyrinth, or what she would do if she ran into any kind of opposition. All she knew was that she had to feel like she was doing something, because doing nothing was driving her mad.

Around the next bend, her heart leapt for there was natural light illuminating the tunnel ahead. She sat the candle on a ledge and went ahead without it to investigate. The scrap that the man had covered her with, she now wore as a makeshift headscarf and shawl, and Romelle grasped it tightly under her chin as she continued on. Her excitement soon turned to disappointment as she saw her way was blocked by an iron gate.

At the same time she heard sounds, like the cheers of a large crowd, and crept a bit closer. Her eyes widened when she caught a glimpse of huge beast beyond the gate. But she nearly screamed when she felt someone – or something – grab her good arm. The shawl fell to the ground and a firm hand over her mouth stifled her cries. For a terrifying moment, she thought she was done for. That is, until she recognized the man from the cave that helped her earlier. When he saw the fear die down in her eyes, he relinquished his hold on her.

"Oh, it's you," she said with measured relief. Even if he disturbed her, down here she was sure he was the best thing that she could have had sneak up on her.

"What do you think you're doing?" he admonished, his voice kept to a harsh half-whisper. Not that she figured he'd be heard over the crowd outside.

“Trying to find a way out, not that it’s any of your business.”

“Well, it’s not that way,” he informed her with some annoyance. “You don’t want to see what’s up there. Trust me.”

Romelle sensed he knew more than he was telling. “So, there is a way out. You must show me!”

He stared at her a long moment, her unease growing when she found she couldn’t read him. Without another word, he took hold of her upper arm and practically frog marched her back down the corridor, paying no heed to her protests, demands, or obvious pain.

At first, she thought he was taking her back to where he’d had her lying down before, but the candle he held showed her they took a sharp turn about halfway back. Her heart raced, wondering what he was doing and what his intentions were. Just when she thought about begging him to just let her go, allowing her find her own way, Romelle spotted natural light up ahead once again.

They came to the bottom of a steep slope of earth, which looked as if it had poured in from a sinkhole above them, offering them an avenue of escape after some climbing. She hoped she could make the climb in the shape she was in.

They stood there a long moment, taking in the breeze and fresh air floating down to them from the surface above, until she finally broke the silence.

“If you knew this was here,” she wondered aloud, “how come you didn’t leave before?”

He refused to look at her, and paused a long time before muttering, “I have my reasons.” Then he looked at her with eyes so penetrating it gave her a chill. “Now, *leave*.”

“I-I don’t know if I can make that climb by myself,” she admitted meekly. There was nothing she’d love more than to leave that pit – and possibly him – behind, but she was so tired and so weak.

He roughly grabbed her arm again and dragged her up the incline until she was nearly flung out the opening at the top into the misty air above. She staggered back from him a few steps, the wind stronger on the surface and making her shiver. Romelle didn’t know whether to thank him, run from him, or both. Instead, she stood there holding his gaze for some time, before her compassionate nature overtook her.

“You don’t mean to go back into that pit, do you?”

“I do.”

Romelle swallowed hard. “But...but why? Don’t you want to be free?”

“There’s nothing for me out here anymore.”

Romelle shook her head and took a step back toward him. “That’s not true. That’s no way for a human being to live, down there. Come with me and leave this horrible place behind.”

She reached out her hand for him to take.

The man laughed in a way that left Romelle cold. “It’s that easy, is it? Just leave and all the bad things are left behind.”

She hadn’t meant to simplify his troubles. “That’s not exactly what I meant but you have to be a good person to have helped me. Whatever is troubling you, you have friends somewhere I’m sure that can help you mend. And you know of Allura, someone you must know is nice and compassionate. If you don’t want to help me help her, that’s your business, but at least help yourself.”

He glared at her. “Anything I do or don’t do is none of your business. And ‘nice’ people don’t leave their friends to rot in a pit. Now *get out!*”

He pointed at the horizon beyond Romelle, where she could barely make out through the mist rocky peaks rising in the distance. There was nothing out there. Just wind and rocks and mist, making Romelle wonder if the worst part of the journey was yet to come.

In her hesitation, the man became motivated to start toward her, and rather than risk another manhandling by him, she took the hint and started off on her own.

After several hitching steps, she turned to look back to find he was gone, presumably back underground. The man confused and frightened her, and she couldn’t quite make sense of what he’d meant by friends leaving him to rot in the Pit. Surely, if Allura had known of his fate, she wouldn’t have abandoned him. As Romelle continued on, it occurred to her that perhaps the man was delusional from the start and never knew Allura at all. Still, her heart ached to see someone in such obvious torment and she vowed that if she ever survived her own ordeal that someday she’d come back to Doom and free all the miserable souls on the planet, her angry savior included.

Haggar looked up as Lotor stomped into the lounge, though she was not surprised to see him there. Her crystal ball told her he was on his way, and Haggar made it her business to be present when he arrived. The two of them had unfinished business to address. She wondered if his obvious foul mood was due to his discovering his father’s true plans. But she was soon glad

she hadn't said anything for it became apparent his trouble stemmed from women. More precisely, a certain blonde woman he'd finally won but couldn't quite break of her defiant will.

No news there, she thought with amusement, but what she was after was his acknowledgement for her role yet in the achievement of winning his beauty. It was probably not a good time to broach the subject again, but then the old witch reasoned to herself, when would it ever be? Lotor was always sulking about something, it seemed. And whereas she feared his father's cold, calculated execution of might, it was Lotor's unpredictable temper that made her wary when it came to dealing with him. As such, now was truly as good a time as any to prod for her reward.

He sat heavily in a seat near to her on the long, soft sofa, and took out his flask. After summoning for the girls dancing on a nearby stage to come dance for him, he took a hearty swig of drink. The strong odor of the wine hit Haggar's nostrils and made her grimace.

"No luck with the pretty princess?" It was a rhetorical question, but it was the best conversation starter she could think of.

Lotor fixed his glare on her. "Oh, clever Haggar. Did you consult your crystal ball for that gem? Impressive. Besides, what are you doing in a place like this? You rarely come to the city, and I didn't think scantily clad belly dancers were your type."

Haggar matched his glare with one of her own. For relying on her magic so often, he had an irritating way of using sarcasm on the subject to cut her down when he was feeling mean. It was no matter. She was prepared to press on.

"In fact, my crystal told me you'd be here. You're right, this isn't my top choice of hang-out."

Haggar's nose twitched, the scent of the girls' overpowering perfumes set to give her sinuses fits.

Lotor grunted, his focus on the undulating bodies surrounding him, not Haggar.

"Sire, we've still got the matter of my compensation to discuss," Haggar declared, deciding the direct approach was as good as any. Coba gave a screeching cry of approval from where the cat sat perched on the witch's lap.

Lotor spilled his drink as he drew his sword and held it menacingly to her pet's throat. "Too bad that crystal ball doesn't show you some common sense, Haggar. Can't you tell I'm not in the mood for this now?" he roared. "Now, go pet your pussy somewhere else and leave me alone."

Haggar expected him to be difficult, but threatening her pet – the same pet that was an integral part of the plan that won him his beloved Princess – was going too far. And in her mind, this cinched the fact that he had no intention of rewarding her. Well, if he thought he could just

use her services and toss her aside, he had another thing coming. This was far from over. But for now, she'd play along.

"As you wish, sire," she replied coolly. Lotor lowered his sword.

Haggar grabbed her staff and was about to cast a disappearing spell, when Lotor became obviously disturbed that he couldn't find something he was looking for.

"Something the matter, sire?" she asked, with just enough evident disdain to make her lack of concern clear.

"My communicator," he muttered, searching fruitlessly around his belt. "It's gone. It was clipped right here on my belt earlier. Is this some kind of joke, Haggar?"

Haggar's eyes went wide, and she chuckled in spite of her anger at Lotor. "Really, Lotor, if I were going to mess with you, making your communicator disappear is such a petty parlor trick. I wouldn't waste my time or magic."

Horried realization dawned on Lotor's face, and Haggar couldn't help but feel amused at his distress. Served him right.

"Allura," he breathed. "She must have...Haggar, you've got to take me to her *now*!"

Haggar, however, was already starting to fade from her disappearing spell. Doom's volcanic pits would have to freeze over before she'd help Lotor out now. "Oh, you need some magical help, do you? I'll see if I can find some," she joked before leaving nothing but her mocking laughter behind.

*Our unsleepable friend
Gets the message on an ill wind
All your friends and your foes
Would rather die than have to touch you*

*To say the least I'm truly disappointed
Truly, truly, truly, oh...*

*Drank too much
And I said too much
And theres nowhere to go - but down
Young boy - I wanna help you*

*See these lines ? truly disappointed
Truly, truly, truly, oh...*

*Dont talk to me, no
About people who are nice
cause I have spent my whole life
In ruins
Because of people who are nice
Oh, this world may lack style, I know
Each bud must blossom and grow, oh...*

*Young girl, one day you will be old
But the thing is, I love you now
Mmm ...*

*This is the last song I will ever sing (yeah!)
No: I've changed my mind again (aaw...)*

*Goodnight
And thank you*

--Disappointed, Morrissey