

Love Is Stronger Than Death by Purrsia
Chapter 7: Live To Tell

The chance Allura waited for came when the arrival of a shuttle caught the attention of the robot guard Lotor left behind to watch over her. In fact, whoever was in the shuttle had the attention of most of the Doomites on the street and in the vicinity, allowing Allura to slip into an alleyway and pull out the communicator she'd found on the seat during the journey to the city; it must have worked itself off of Lotor's belt during the bumpy ride. Stowing it away, with Lotor unaware, she'd simply waited for an opportunity to use it to reach out.

She turned her attention to the device, desperately hoping it had some kind of long-range capability while dialing it to a frequency she was sure an ally might pick up. Allura was aware the transmission would also likely be heard by anyone on Doom that might be listening, but the important thing to her was to let someone – anyone – friendly know that she was alive and trapped on Doom.

Taking a deep breath, Allura began to speak into the device. "This is Princess Allura of Planet Arus. I'm being held on Doom against my will. Please, if you can hear me, help."

The communicator responded with a crack of static, and Allura held her breath as she hoped for a reply. When it wasn't forthcoming, she repeated her plea. Again, came no response.

Feeling both frustrated and frightened, Allura tweaked the settings and prepared to try for a third time, hoping it would indeed be the charm. This could be her only chance to get word out. It had to work!

"This is Princess Allura—"

Pain shot up her arm, and Allura screamed as she dropped the communicator to the ground. She fell against the wall, cradling her bleeding forearm while all too aware of an imposing shadow that loomed over her.

Allura cast her eyes up, her breath catching in her throat when she saw the figure that blotted out the sun and her escape from the alley. Zarkon!

He took a step toward her, and Allura instinctively shrunk back. His arrival in town must have been what had the citizens' attention, she vaguely thought, and now he had her cornered in an alley. Allura's mouth went dry and her heart felt like it would leap out of her chest at any moment. There was nowhere to run.

Before Zarkon could come any closer, Lotor pushed his way past his father to put himself in between him and the frightened princess. Allura hated to admit it, but this time she was glad to see Lotor.

Lotor reached down and plucked a golden scepter from where it stuck into the ground, and pointed it at his father. It was streaked with blood and Allura knew that was what had wounded her. Rather than appearing threatened by the gesture, Zarkon took the scepter back into his possession with obvious annoyance.

“I’ve got it under control,” Lotor snarled, his tone thick with warning.

“Do you? Looks to me like your bride-to-be can’t get away from you fast enough, Lotor.”

Allura moved so that she was completely hidden behind Lotor and away from Zarkon’s piercing glare.

“I’ve got it under control,” he repeated sternly. “You didn’t have to hurt her. I’ll take care of it.”

A long silence followed, until Allura heard Zarkon grunt something unintelligible to her ears. Slowly, she peeked around Lotor and saw the king had left, but several gawkers remained, peering down the alley at the pair.

Their amusement at the situation unnerved Lotor. “Go on, get out of here! There’s nothing more to see here.”

His sharp tone sent the curious dashing in all directions. Lotor then turned to face Allura, and her relief at his presence quickly vanished. His expression was cold, making Allura wonder if his wrath might be worse than his father’s. Her jaw worked, words – or rather excuses – wanting badly to spill out but she was unable to vocalize any of what she was thinking.

“Come with me,” he ordered, grabbing hold of her roughly by her uninjured arm.

She could only gasp in protest as he led her back out on the sidewalk and down the busy street.

Keith had reached the asteroid belt and treacherous electrical field that surrounded Doom, waiting near a group of space debris for an opportunity to slip into the planet’s atmosphere undetected. As he’d hoped, his Lion handled the conditions rather well given lightning was its power source. All he needed now was to catch a fleet of ships, perhaps coming back to Doom from some interstellar mission, so he could latch onto their signals and tail them in to the surface below.

It had become a tedious waiting game. He couldn’t even talk with any of the team to pass the time. Not only was he out there alone but he’d turned off any long-distance channels because he didn’t want to risk those communications being intercepted and hence his cover blown. The short

distance communicator was all that he left on in the hopes of catching some Doomite exchanges. All he had now was time to sit and wait...and think.

As hard as he tried to avoid it, his thoughts turned to Allura and her untimely fate. Even with all they faced in the wake of her passing, her loss troubled him more deeply than anything else. He closed his eyes, his mind taking him back to that fateful day.

He recalled her golden hair, shining in the sun to rival the shimmering lake they'd been enjoying that afternoon. Keith remembered her smile, wide and radiant. She'd been in good spirits, and he thought she might enjoy a bouquet of wild flowers, knowing fragrant blooms were always a hit with the Princess. Everything felt serene and safe, so he let his guard down. In the chaos that followed, he heard her terrified cries above it all but remained helpless to stop it.

The memory of her voice was so intense, even, he thought for a moment that he heard it coming over the Lion's short distance communicator amid the crackle and hiss and other cacophony of the universe around him.

"Princess Allura," came the voice, truncated by an extra loud burst of static on the channel, courtesy of a flashing bolt of electricity nearby.

His eyes flew open. He listened hard for her to say her name again from out of the static. Seconds ticked by as the channel remained clear. Keith's finger hovered over the button that would open the channel for him to reply, but no. He couldn't risk blowing his cover for what was likely, he was sure, wishful thinking by an imagination in mourning run wild.

He was there when she'd stopped breathing, the whoosh of the respirator gone silent. He was there when Doctor Gorma checked her vital signs and found none. He was there when she'd been laid to rest in the flower-filled casket and a mourning people paid their last respects. And whoever desecrated her grave was going to pay, he reminded himself.

"She's gone," he muttered to himself sternly. It was no nightmare. Her death had been all too real. "Gotta accept that."

But even as the channel remained devoid of the warmth of her voice, just as he expected it to, Keith couldn't help but feel the stab of disappointment in his gut. Oh, but what a miracle it would be indeed if somehow she was still out there somewhere.

It was time to focus on the mission, not the past, he admonished himself. Gaining some critical intelligence on this mission was the best way he could ensure Arus remained free and honor her memory, Keith decided, not daydreaming.

The appearance of an incoming Doom fleet on the radar put all foolish notions firmly out of his mind. It was time to do what he'd come there to do.

“If he wasn’t my only son...”

Zarkon let the threat hang in the air inside Castle Doom’s throne room, the scene back at the city and the anger it sparked still fresh in his mind. He didn’t expect Haggar or Mogor to react much to his tirade, for to them it was mostly just mutterings admonishing Lotor; he wasn’t in the mood to rehash the scene for their sake. But at least they were present and waiting for his next orders, something Lotor should be doing instead of off chasing skirts. Or letting an important skirt almost get away.

For his part, Zarkon was past caring about the fate of Allura and if Lotor bungled that now it was his problem. What intrigued him was the state Arus was left in, and he had every intention of striking before Allura mattered again either way. His promise to wait 48 hours for Lotor to get around to marrying the Arusian princess was not a binding agreement and he had no intention of keeping it as such. However, recent attempts to take Arus made it obvious they were managing even without a skilled or permanent pilot in blue lion, so Voltron was still a thorn in his royal side.

He’d considered again using Allura for his own purposes, mainly as a hostage to force the surrender of the remaining Voltron Force. However, upon careful reflection and past hostage failures – the luck of the universe seemed to be on the side of the Voltron Force – he decided it was better after all that they continue to think Allura met her fate. The only downside was Lotor’s distraction, but the grief and chaos Allura’s “end” brought about could actually work to his advantage. Their fighting wasn’t up to par, and perhaps with a few more insistent barrages they would break. Learning Allura was alive and in need of rescue would put fire back in their fight.

He only hoped nobody heard the girl’s plea, though Zarkon was fairly certain the signal didn’t get far. The kind of communicator she’d gotten her hands on wasn’t the kind that was good at throwing signals out into space and even if it could, her message would have likely broken up amid the electrical storms that constantly fire throughout the protective asteroid belt which surrounds Doom.

It was time to change tactics, he’d decided. Since Bandor was out of the picture and Lotor had disposed of Romelle, the last two remaining members of Pollux’s royal family, that planet was completely devoid of proper leadership. They’d certainly lost more defying him than when they were allied with the Drule Empire, and that may work to his advantage as well. If things went well enough, he may be able to take Pollux with little resistance. The people had to be frightened, desperate and battle weary. All that should be required would be filling their head with promises and vows of protection. The right spin could convince those people it was better before Bandor and Romelle ruined everything by double-crossing Doom. It could be enough to make at least the sensible among them realize that it was better to give in than to resist, especially after an example was made out of Arus. They’d soon know what awaited all those who dared even think of bucking his authority and he was going to use Pollux as a springboard for the next big onslaught on Arus. Strategically, it would make a perfect base of operations for that mission not to mention the resources he could plunder from it.

“Mogor,” he said, turning to his only competent and loyal commander. “Get a fleet ready to invade Pollux.”

Pidge trailed Hunk into Castle Control, brushing his forearm across his sweat soaked brow. It wasn't the heat of the day that was the issue, though the weather was unpleasantly humid outside. Rather, Orla's first training session in the Blue Lion had just concluded, and the exercise had frayed on Pidge's nerves like few things could. She was, bluntly, no Allura. Even on Allura's worst day, she flew circles around her aunt. At this rate, Pidge would rather see Coran take over or heck – maybe even Nanny or the Space Mice! Orla herself had been shaken by the experience, choosing to retire to her quarters, which was just as well.

Word that Lance was awake and stirring was what brought them in, making Pidge grateful on just more than the obvious level. He simply hoped Zarkon was busy with something else and wouldn't attack again anytime soon because, not only was Keith still gone on his mission, but they simply weren't ready for it.

The chair at the controls swiveled around, and Pidge expected Coran to greet them. Instead, there sat Lance, looking rather amused.

“Shouldn't you be lying down?” Pidge asked, sounding more annoyed than he intended to, especially given the fact that it really was good to see Lance alert and up.

“Shouldn't you be a few feet taller?” Lance shot back. “Who was that in the Blue Lion? I caught the end of that flight on the monitors and I have to say, if that's the new recruit GG sent we need to send him packing. That was awful.”

Hunk grunted, so it was left to Pidge to field the questions. “I guess you don't remember, but the GG pilot got shot down by Zarkon's forces. That was Orla.”

“What!”

Pidge couldn't tell what Lance was more floored by – the pilot's loss or Orla being the mystery pilot. Pidge simply shrugged. It wasn't his idea.

When Lance finally got his composure back, he asked, “Does Keith know about this?”

“Yeah, he told us to try to train her before he jetted off to Doom in Black Lion.”

Lance ran his hand through his hair and sat back in the chair to mull over the information. “Wow,” he finally said. “I missed a lot.”

“Well, can somebody knock me out? I don’t wanna witness the rest,” Pidge muttered.

Lights and alarms lighting up the control panel ended the conversation, and everyone’s attention turned to the images that came up on the main screen.

“Oh no,” Hunk moaned, noting the mass of blips on the radar nearing Pollux. “Pollux is under attack. What do we do?”

“Without Keith, we can’t go with Voltron,” Pidge noted, “but we gotta do something. Poor Bandor and Romelle – we owe them that much.”

“Uh, guys,” Lance interrupted, his attention elsewhere. “We’ve just acquired our own problems.”

The screen’s image changed, showing another wave of Zarkon’s forces, except this one was nearing Arus.

“I heard the alarms,” came a feminine voice from behind Pidge. “What is it?”

Pidge turned to see Orla, still in her flight suit, standing behind him. He fought the urge to cringe.

“Pollux is under attack and we’re about to be,” Hunk informed her grimly.

Lance stood up. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

When it was obvious Orla was following them to the launch bays, Pidge nudged Hunk. They were going to have a hard enough time without Queen Crash-and-Burn to worry about. Hunk, it seemed, picked up on his unspoken worries.

“Uh, why don’t you stay here and help us from Control?” Hunk suggested to Orla, though his tone was giving him away. “Coran must still be in the village and we could really use someone on the ground here to help us see the bigger picture.”

“Besides,” Pidge added quickly. “We can’t form Voltron without Keith anyway so unless he comes back soon you might as well sit tight.”

Pidge could see Orla was hurt, but resigned to her new post. She simply nodded her compliance with lips pouting and shoulders slumped. Three lions were going to face tough odds out there, especially since Lance’s health was still in question, but frankly, he’d rather fly with Lance than her.

That settled, the trio headed to launch.

Allura sat across from Lotor, in a lavish suite inside one of the city's high rises, far above and away from the din of daily life on the streets below. Her arm still stung where Zarkon's scepter struck it. Looking down at the bandage around it now, she still found it hard to believe that Lotor himself insisted on tending to the wound when they first arrived, and with surprisingly tender care at that.

She thought for certain he'd be angry with her, only getting in the way of Zarkon so he could unleash his wrath on her first. Though he did seem to be brooding, it wasn't in anger she decided. At least, not directed toward her.

Just when she wondered what was next, he produced some papers from a nearby desk and slid them across the table toward her. At first, she looked at the documents, then to Lotor, and back at the papers again.

"It's not much in way of a proposal," Lotor began. She thought he might have winced a little when her blue eyes fixed on him with suspicion. "Trust me, Allura, it's better for both of us this way."

Her eyes fell back to the documents, scanning the words quickly, frantically until their meaning sunk in. He wanted her to sign her life away to him!

"Better?" she managed to choke out. Allura wondered if it could get much worse.

For Lotor's part, she had to admit he looked weary. Whatever grand plans he may have once held to woo her were being abandoned, and he was settling for this less impressive tactic. Of course, his hopes of romancing her were as dead and buried as everyone thought she was the instant he kidnapped her and set this nightmare in motion. There really was no other way left to go about it than as a cold, calculated business proposal. Even he must know that now.

"Sign that and you not only bind us together in marriage, Allura, but our kingdoms as well."

Allura's eyes narrowed. "So far, you're giving me every reason not to sign that."

"What choice do you have!" he snapped. "Nobody heard your call, Allura. Nobody is going to come for you, and you can't escape. Soon, we'll assault Arus and leave nothing alive, no building standing if you refuse. You've nothing to lose and everything," he paused to gesture around him, "to gain."

Tears welled up in Allura's eyes when she thought of the cruel fate that awaited her people and her friends. How could Lotor be so cruel? Her bottom lip trembled as she spoke. "I'd rather die with them than be your bride. How do you expect me to agree to this when I know what you're capable of? Lying is as natural to you as taking a breath."

Lotor massaged his forehead and sighed heavily. “Allura, if our kingdoms are united you can stop this carnage from happening. My father is not going to obliterate a new acquisition to his kingdom. Those that defy him, however...”

Allura blinked and tears spilled over. Trusting Lotor of all people was a huge leap.

As if sensing her hesitation, he continued to push. “I promise you, Princess, if you marry me, I’ll make sure the Voltron Force is spared a cruel fate. But there’s little time. You’ve less than 24 hours now to make your decision.”

She swallowed hard, looking to the documents with uncertainty. “You said yourself earlier that it was your father’s war, that you had no real say in the matter.”

Surely this was some sort of manipulation. Surely it would take more than her signature to save them all now. Besides, what if they weren’t doomed? What if they managed to hold on and her union with Lotor actually did more harm than good? There were many variables to consider and yet there was so little time to think them all over.

“Are you not listening? If we’re married, that changes everything my dear.”

Indeed it did, she thought grimly.

He tossed a pen in her direction, and as a reflex she caught it. The minutes ticked by as she pondered her decision, all the while Lotor’s impatience was almost palpable. She wondered about the changes she wasn’t anticipating, even positive ones. What if Lotor changed? What if there could be a beneficial alliance between Arus and Doom, where both of their societies could flourish in peace? Dare she imagine it? Dare she dream Lotor could have an unexpected facet to him, much like this shiny gem of a city sparkling at the foot of misty, gloomy mountains? He had, after all, saved her twice since she’d been his unwilling companion and she’d seen other glimpses of a kind emotion in him. Still, it was a lot to gamble on. There were three times as many heinous acts Lotor had been involved with that were fresh in her mind for every glimpse of kindness she could recall. That wasn’t exactly a glowing recommendation for marriage.

Allura didn’t know what to do.

Haggar hurried about her lab, rushing to complete Zarkon’s robeast order before the main assault on Arus. The fleet there now was just to distract the Lions while Pollux was brought under the Empire’s umbrella again. But it had to be ready by the time reinforcements that had arrived earlier from the Empire’s fifth kingdom were ready to leave and launch what was hoped to be the final attack on Arus. The Voltron Force weren’t the only ones with allies in the galaxy. But

Arus's closest allies were on Pollux and soon there would be no hope of any help from them. The closest Garrison fleet couldn't arrive to help them in time either, so the only thing they had to worry about was the Force pulling Voltron out of their hat again. That's where she came in with her magic.

She pored over a spell book. Haggar didn't always do her best work in such a rush, but she was determined to get this right so they could take adequate advantage of this window of opportunity. Zarkon, at least, rewarded her efforts promptly unlike his son. She was still angry with Lotor for his lack of proper compensation, and part of her hoped Allura had somehow gotten away. She hadn't bothered to catch up on the situation after she'd blipped out of that lounge laughing in his face. Haggar had caught wind of Zarkon's arrival in the city in time to humiliate Lotor publicly, Zarkon's earlier rantings in the throne room testament the rumors were likely true, and that brought a smile to her face. It was no less than he deserved.

Haggar chastised herself for letting her mind wander again. As fun as it was to snicker about Lotor's misfortunes, she needed to focus!

An ear-piercing shriek from Coba made the old witch cringe while shattering any sort of focus she'd managed to muster.

"What is it?" she hissed, whirling around to glare at the feline.

Coba was on the other side of the lab, sitting atop a table that was near her crystal ball. The cat got up and began pacing near the crystal, clearly agitated.

When Haggar approached, the ball took on a muted glow and she soon saw what had Coba so restless. Inside the magical globe, she beheld an image of the Black Lion ostensibly hidden in the foothills below the Castle, and beyond that was the Voltron Force captain himself, hiking his way across the rocky terrain.

Haggar thought about reporting the intruder to Zarkon or Lotor, but a better plan formed in her wicked mind. A plan that was better for her. For the time being, it was good that Keith was on Doom. That meant for sure there'd be no Voltron. For now, she was content to let Keith nose around. There was little he could do as one man wandering around in the mountains, for if he tried to get close to anything too important, he'd just be captured or executed. Let him think he'd gotten onto Doom undetected. That would give her enough time to whip up a little present on the side for his departure. His permanent departure if she could help it. For that she needed the element of surprise.

"Come, kitty. We have work to do double quick," Haggar said, with and unusual mirth in her voice, her eyes taking on a golden glow.

Romelle staggered along the dusty path, gasping with every step. She was frustrated with her condition, her lack of progress, and altogether helplessness. She wasn't even sure what good she was doing by pushing herself. Well, other than the belief that if she got some help or could get away, she could get help for Allura and every other captive on this miserable planet. But with each agonizing step, her hopes of being the heroine were being dashed.

"It's no use," she gasped, sinking to her knees. The wind whistled past her, practically pushing her the rest of the way to the dirt. She was too tired to fight it.

She laid there, groaning in the middle of a mountain pass on Doom, wondering how it had come to this. Of course, she knew fully well. There was a time when her family loathed planet Arus and their distant cousins that lived there. Foolishly, it turned out, buying into lies and clinging onto old slights that just didn't matter anymore. But not before Lotor and his minions came to exploit the ill will.

Romelle felt bile rise to her throat when she remembered how she was actually charmed by Lotor when first she met him. She'd even considered a serious romance with the dark prince. Back then they'd have been a perfect match with the two of them caught up in their own short-sighted pursuits and hung up on petty vengeance.

He had been charming indeed, until her family was of no use to him any longer. When Avok began to lose against Voltron, she started to see who Lotor really was. Romelle saw the writing on the wall and realized the folly of allying herself with an Empire so bent on serving only themselves.

Her father and eldest brother were the first to learn the lesson in the harshest of ways. And then she'd been taken away from her home world to be used as a pawn in Lotor's various plots, and as some kind of stand-in for Allura who, she'd come to learn, was the focal point of an unhealthy obsession for him. Under his servitude, she'd seen like never before what a liar Lotor was. He'd tell a thousand lies a minute if he thought it would get him what he wanted, and if it didn't, he'd take a thousand lives that stood in his way.

All this was learned too late, of course. In the brief time she'd gotten to meet Allura and the Voltron Force, she'd seen how wrong she had been about them all along. They were who Pollux should have joined forces with, and for a while Bandor had tried. But then, Bandor had paid. Now, it was up to her to fight; for her planet, for Allura and the horrible deception Lotor brought upon her and Arus, and for herself.

But as determined as Romelle was to live to tell her story in mind and spirit, her body refused to go on. If only she'd been able to signal someone when Lotor took her along as a captive during that raid on Arus. Maybe that was her only chance. Right now, the hope of getting a second chance was looking frighteningly slim.

Romelle rested her forehead on the ground, the fight draining out of her, and closed her eyes. She simply could not carry on.

*I have a tale to tell
Sometimes it gets so hard to hide it well
I was not ready for the fall
Too blind to see the writing on the wall*

*A man can tell a thousand lies
Ive learned my lesson well
Hope I live to tell
The secret I have learned, till then
It will burn inside of me*

*I know where beauty lives
Ive seen it once, I know the warm she gives
The light that you could never see
It shines inside, you cant take that from me*

*The truth is never far behind
You kept it hidden well
If I live to tell
The secret I knew then
Will I ever have the chance again*

*If I ran away, Id never have the strength
To go very far
How would they hear the beating of my heart
Will it grow cold
The secret that I hide, will I grow old
How will they hear
When will they learn
How will they know?*

--Live to Tell, Madonna

