

Winning Days by Purrsia
Book IV: The Beaten Generation
Part II

With the Land Team out in space running maneuvers with their fill-in pilot, Sven, the Sea and Air teams were called to the lower decks to wait their turns at the voice line-up. One by one, the team members gathered outside a conference room, with Lisa and Ginger arriving first. Lisa, of course, didn't have to go in herself, but she did need to prepare to listen after Keira was through.

"This is silly," Lisa told Ginger as they waited outside the room where the line-up was taking place. "I know it wasn't any of the team."

Ginger just shrugged. "Then I guess none of us has anything to worry about. I wonder if Keira already identified someone."

Soon everyone seemed accounted for except for one person – Jeff. Both girls noticed his conspicuous absence, but it was Cric who vocalized it.

"Where's Jeff?" he wondered, looking down the corridor as if expecting Jeff to round the corner in the next instant.

Ginger shook her head. "He went to see the commander the last I know."

"I was there at the meeting, too," Cric affirmed. "But after we left, I don't know where he went. It's not like him to be this late."

"Maybe he's the spy," Shannon quipped, but recoiled a bit when his jest wasn't received in good humor by his teammates.

Lisa looked down the long, empty expanse of corridor. "Or maybe something's wrong," she countered with a frown, her hand instinctively going up to her neck where her moonstone necklace would normally hang. Of course, she'd given it to Jeff earlier. She found herself hoping it was giving him the luck it was known for on her world.

She glanced at Ginger, whose worried expression matched Lisa's own, and both women knew what had to be done. "Let's go," Ginger urged.

"If the Commander asks, let him know we'll be back soon," Lisa told the others.

"Are you serious?" Shannon asked incredulously. "The guy's a bit late and we're going to call out a search party?"

Cric was silent for a moment, his expression turning soft and thoughtful. The girls had paused, waiting for him to speak.

“I too feel something isn’t right,” Cric began carefully, and winced slightly at how the girls reacted for he likely just made their fears multiply ten-fold. “But I also say, they shouldn’t go alone. Not with this treasonous spy among us. We’ve seen what he tried to do to Hutch, not to mention he attacked Lisa before, too. And now that she may be one of only two people to be able to identify him, she should be looked after as much as possible. The guy will stop at nothing.”

Rocky scratched his head. “But we got an order from Hawkins to be right here.”

“Then you and Shannon and anyone else who wants to can stay – I’m going with Lisa and Ginger,” Cric replied.

Shannon snorted. “Won’t you lot feel silly when you find he’s been on the crapper or something.”

Lisa rolled her eyes at the notion.

“It’s nice to know that with Hutch too sick to speak, we still have a resident smart ass on deck,” Ginger shot back, to which Shannon took a brief bow.

With that, the trio left to search for their missing comrade.

Even amid the chaos and disorder, Twila managed to clean herself up enough to be presentable when she met with Throk – although it took much convincing to get his entourage to even entertain why she needed to see him. He’d been under heavy protection since Dorma went on her homicidal rampage.

The area of the underground city where Throk was staying survived the last violent tremor well and Twila was grateful for it – no doubt a testament to the fine and strong construction reserved for the structures designed to house the upper echelon of the Drule hierarchy. To Twila, it was one less thing to worry about, as surely having a building come down around oneself was not her idea of a party. She felt free enough to focus her mind on what she needed to do now. With Nerok out of the way and his spy now on her payroll things would surely start to look up. At least, this is what she chose to concentrate on. She gave herself the creeps if she considered the ambiance on Drule exuded much more than a rising panic and fear among its citizens...something darker was lurking in the heart of the planet as well as its people.

The guards outside Throk’s building let her pass without much trouble, and Twila decided to take the stairs up – she didn’t want to chance being in the elevator if another tremor hit regardless of the seeming sturdiness of the structure.

It was a credit to the shape she was in that she arrived timely and barely winded from the effort. The floor was oddly deserted, and Twila had to fight her nagging intuition once more. She would have expected a heavy guard presence on the floor. Nobody may have been visible, but that didn't stop her from feeling as if many eyes were upon her.

When she reached the door to his loft, she didn't even have to announce herself – it simply slid open, beckoning her inside.

Cautiously, she stepped inside and at first, she didn't see anyone much less Throk among all the fine furniture and art in the room. Movement finally caught her eye, as Throk slowly swiveled around in a chair on the far side of the room to reveal himself.

“Welcome, Twila,” he greeted her, his tone low and pleasant enough, though she sensed a hint of irritation in it.

Instinctively, she straightened her back and squared her shoulders in an effort to make her stride across the room appear as confident as possible. Being among the few female captains in the Drule forces, Twila learned early on not to show any fear or weakness. She never did feel comfortable around Throk, but she'd surely not let him know that if she could help it. She found the man creepy, and it was no secret what a letch he was.

“Please sit,” he said when she approached, gesturing to a chair across from him. “Have some wine if you'd like.”

Twila eyed the half-empty bottle on the table near Throk and thought better of it. She was going to need her wits about her now more than ever.

“No, thank you,” she replied, a bit more curtly than she'd intended, all the while keeping eye contact with Throk. She did, however, sit.

He ogled her shamelessly for a moment, and Twila tried not to show her irritation with the once-over. His leering was so obvious she fought to stifle a sigh. It was times such as these she marveled at how it was men managed to stay in power. In the back of her mind, she was inclined to think that maybe Throk got what he deserved from Dorma.

“What happened to you?” he finally asked referring, no doubt, to the scrapes and bruises she sported. Not that he seemed particularly concerned, she noticed.

“I had the luck of being in the Council Building earlier.”

She hadn't come there to make small talk, so she didn't feel like going into any more detail.

Throk took a sip from his wine glass. “I heard Nerok and a few others didn't make it out with their lives. A pity.” His tone was anything but piteous.

“Too bad Hazar wasn’t found among the dead,” he added with enough vitriol that Twila almost shuddered.

She was certainly glad she wasn’t on his list – Throk hadn’t gotten where he was in the Drule chain of command by being a nice guy. And experience showed her that once he had it in for you, you were apt to wish a building would crush the life out of you instead. She almost pitied Dorma as a result.

“Yeah, I got lucky,” she replied casually, leaving out the small detail of how she watched Nerok take his last breath, or the fact that she got a strange enjoyment out of it. That asshole deserved to die sniveling and begging for his life.

“So, what is this urgent matter of business you have to discuss with me? There’s much going on, as I’m sure you noticed, so I don’t have time for games.” He leaned forward in his seat and peered at her closely, but she did not shrink under his scrutiny. Rather, she met his piercing gaze head-on. “Is this really so important that one of the commanders can’t handle it?”

Twila leaned in as a challenge. “I thought you might want to hear it first. I have found out that the Alliance is making preparations to invade Drule.”

His wine glass hit the floor and shattered, but Twila never took her eyes off Throk.

“What?” he thundered, rising to his feet. “That’s impossible! I told you I didn’t have time for games, woman.”

Twila noticed, as Throk raged, that he limited movement of one arm, no doubt from the stabbing. True, she’d heard he was stabbed in the chest, but apparently, moving his arm too much aggravated the injury.

Weakness. She fought back a wry smile.

She stood slowly, her expression remaining serious and determined. “It’s not a game. And if you’re not a fool, you’ll heed the warning and make preparations,” she added boldly.

His eyes narrowed to slits as she studied her, clearly still the skeptic. “How do you know this? How do they figure they’re going to find Drule amid the asteroid belts? And even if they do get here, they won’t know where to find us down here. You tell lies, woman. How dare you waste my time!”

“I have my sources,” she replied calmly, even though his agitated state was starting to worry her. Twila eyed him levelly. “As for how they’d pull it off, Hazar’s helping them.”

Throk’s jaw went slack. “Traitor!” he wailed.

“If you can’t stop Hazar, prepare for the worse. Our home world situation will pale in comparison to what’s about to happen. Imagine yourself living under Alliance rule, stripped of

your power and your pride. Being helpless to watch them expand their sphere of influence in this galaxy until we have no identity left as a people.”

Twila let a satisfied grin spread across her face while Throk busied himself with calling out on his communicator. She’d gotten to him just as she’d hoped.

“I want Hazar and his sister shot on sight,” he simply said to the person on the receiving end before hanging up.

Not even going to feign a trial this time, Twila thought. Impressive.

He then turned his attention back to her.

“I have to see the Emperor. You can see yourself out.”

“You’re welcome,” she scoffed under her breath at his retreating form. It was no matter. She didn’t expect credit or thanks for the information, really. But there is something she could do now that would undeniably make her service and loyalty to the Empire known, and then maybe she could finally get some due respect. And that something was to be the one to bring in Hazar’s head on a platter.

Cliff thought the training exercises were going well. Sven was quick to learn and a hell of a pilot – surely not as rusty as the Commander had been, not that he dared comment aloud to that effect. He thought they’d soon be ready to practice with the other two teams and attempt forming Voltron. That would happen as soon as the spy business was sorted out, he assumed.

Flying in single formation just above where the Explorer drifted in space, Cliff noticed a fighter jet fly out of the docking bay and thought it odd for those usually only deployed to back-up the rest of the fleet during a Drule attack. And it was particularly odd to only see one launch, so it was safe for Cliff to assume there was no pending attack. The Commander soon came over his telecom to confirm his suspicions.

“Tail that jet,” Hawkins told him. “It was an unauthorized launch, and what’s worse is, we have a few dead dock guards left in the wake. That could be our traitor.”

“Yes sir,” Cliff replied. “It’s a wonder he didn’t try to take one of the Voltron units again. Now we could just shoot him down, couldn’t we?”

“Last time the units were in for repairs, we had some modifications done so he couldn’t do what he’d done before – or rather, used Keira to do before. Perhaps he knew that,” Hawkins theorized, “and didn’t have time to come up with a new device to override the modifications. Or the increased security on that side of the dock may have deterred him. Remember, not even the

Voltron Force can take those ships out now without prior clearance. But we can't raise him on ultrawave or the telecom either – he's still hiding his identity from us."

"You sure it's not Keira in there?"

"I'm sure," Hawkins affirmed. "She's confirmed as still below deck, safe and sound, as is Sandu. Her lesson was hard learned."

"And use of force?" Cliff pressed.

"For right now, hold off on deadly force. Only fire on him if it seems he's going to get away or gets aggressive with you. We want to bring him in alive, if possible," Hawkins replied.

As ordered, Cliff and his team stayed on the vessel, which tried desperately to shake them – all to no avail. Cliff could tell this guy wasn't the best pilot, but his skills were good enough to escape if they didn't stay on him.

The jet then turned in a wide arc and came back at the group of five Land Team vessels and fired at them. Shots grazed Cliff's unit and it angered him.

"Stay on this guy, team," Cliff radioed to his comrades. "He wants to play for keeps."

He again reiterated the commander's orders concerning the rogue vessel while they re-grouped and once again tailed it as it headed back toward the Explorer.

"What's he doing?" Modoch asked, and Cliff wondered the same thing. The missiles under each wing of the jet lowered, threatening to deploy - but not at Cliff and his team, rather at the Explorer.

Cliff knew two missiles wouldn't take out the entire ship – the Explorer was too massive of a ship to be taken out that easily - but if they were well-placed, they could take out a portion of it, doing considerable damage and taking untold lives among the crew. Cliff had an awful feeling stir in his gut as he thought of where the traitor could be aiming the missiles. Namely, where it would do the most damage - right at the protruding top deck where the bridge was located, and in all likelihood, where Commander Hawkins sat. Even worse, the Explorer couldn't pour on the firepower with them out there, too, without risk of hitting the Land units. They could try to maneuver out of the way, but there wasn't time for that.

"We're going to have to take him out," Cliff decided, but just as he was going to add not to completely destroy the jet, Marvin cut out ahead of the pack and fired.

The shots hit the jet just as the missiles were released, but Marvin's aim was true and hit the jet, disabling it enough to skew the path of the missiles. The Explorer itself was able to intercept one with firepower of its own, the flash from the explosion temporarily blinding Cliff.

When he could see again, he noticed the other missile did hit the upper deck of the Explorer, but luckily off course enough only to take out the upper portion of the spire. With any luck, nobody on the bridge was hurt.

The jet itself had flown through part of the first missile explosion and was flying erratically. It took a sharp dive and was on a crash course with the landing deck portion of the Explorer. It all happened so fast nobody had time to react.

Before he knew it, Cliff was blinded by another flash, this one caused by the jet meeting the Explorer's landing deck and disintegrating on impact.

That area of the Explorer took considerable damage but no catastrophic damage was done. One thing Cliff knew for certain, whoever had been in that jet was dead.

Twila tried to raise the spy on the device she'd stolen from Nerok to no avail. She'd hoped he could clue her in on where Hazar would likely be hiding out. She also knew the silence likely meant the spy's desperate departure was unsuccessful in some way, but it was no matter. He was becoming a liability anyway, and she surely didn't want to have him come to Drule and have to deal with harboring a backstabbing human. She preferred to use him at a distance, as any human was hard to trust let alone one that would ruthlessly betray his own kind.

She glanced up and down the dusty, deserted streets trying to sort out her next move. The hour was late, though underground it all looked the same no matter the time of day – drab, sparsely lit streets of stone, steel and dust. The level of activity was the real clue to the hour, and there wasn't much activity going on in the streets. The only sounds she could hear were some tanks in the distance, no doubt patrolling for troublemakers, rebels or those two prize fugitives. Twila was determined to stay one step ahead of them.

It'd been hours since her meeting with Throk, and she was starting to think she wasn't going to find Hazar anywhere. She'd looked down every dark alley, in every abandoned structure – any place a fugitive might lay low – and found nothing but a few rodents and drunken vagrants for her trouble. One thing was certain – this part of the city was a far cry from the relative lap of luxury in which Throk and his ilk lived. But what better place to find a rat than among the poor, ignorant masses, she reasoned.

The sound of an approaching shuttle prompted Twila to take cover behind a steel pillar that was part of the building she was near. When the shuttle neared, it slowed down enough for her to glance around the corner and get a good look at the occupant. Though she wasn't lucky enough for Hazar, or even Dorma, to be inside she did recognize the man.

Mongo, Hazar's best friend. A small smile formed on her lips. I'm sure he knows where to find Hazar.

The shuttle had slowed to make a turn down a side street, and Twila was determined to follow it. She dashed across the street after it, hoping it wouldn't go so fast that she wouldn't be able to keep up.

As luck would have it, the shuttle didn't go much farther, apparently due to the fact that the street narrowed too much for the shuttle to fit. She crouched behind a pile of old crates and other debris at the side of the street and waited for Mongo to exit and continue his journey on foot.

Her heart thumped furiously in her chest as she moved along the street stealthily behind Mongo, always keeping him in sight. She dared hope he'd be going to meet with Hazar. One thing was for sure – he was up to something underhanded as paranoid as he was behaving. But that was all the more reason she needed to plan her moves carefully. He mustn't realize she was following.

Eventually, the street narrowed into something more like an alley and it was there that Mongo stepped inside a darkened and abandoned structure.

I knew it! Twila thought as she cautiously followed.

There was no door for him to close, so Twila simply lurked and stayed low near the opening, peering around the corner. She saw a figure she was sure was Mongo approach someone else who was holding a candle, the flickering flame the only light in the structure. She could see the candle holder's face well and she was disappointed to see it was neither Hazar or Dorma – or really anyone she recognized. It appeared to be a simple commoner, though she could see he had quite a lot of weapons and ammo on him. She frowned, finding the rebellion of the citizenry staring her in the face quite disturbing. It was like a slap in the face how ungrateful the whole concept was to her.

But she controlled her emotions and listened hard, hoping to maybe hear them speak of Hazar and hint at his location – anything that would help her cause. But it was no use – they spoke too softly.

"You're a long way from the upper part of town."

The woman's voice from beside her startled Twila badly. She turned to see a pistol pointed at her face and gasped to note the holder of that pistol was none other than Dorma.

"Get up," Dorma ordered her coolly.

Twila slowly rose to her feet, keeping her hands up as if she planned to cooperate. "Threatening me with that gun is treason – you could hang for that."

Dorma appeared nonplussed by the possibility. "In case you haven't noticed, we can no longer afford to play the Empire's game."

“A game? Is that what it is? Prepare to lose, then. We’ve conquered entire worlds – whole races of people. Do you really think you, Hazar and a rag-tag bunch of disgruntled and ignorant citizens is really going to do anything but get yourselves killed?”

Dorma glared at Twila. “Wake up, fool. We’re all dead unless somebody does something to evacuate us. The Empire seems in no rush to do so.”

“What do you think we keep fighting the Alliance for? They’re coming into our galaxy and trying to settle all the good worlds **we** need. If you and your idiot brother spent more time helping us drive the Alliance out instead of plotting against your own government, this war might be over by now and we could be evacuating. Where are we going to go, Dorma? Are we going to float around in space aimlessly with no food, no water, and no place to go?” Twila felt the anger at their disloyalty flaring up tremendously and she no longer cared about the pistol pointed at her. Besides, she didn’t think Dorma had it in her to shoot one of her own. Twila knew Dorma had some combat training, but she also knew Dorma had rarely put it to use preferring to spend her time sponging off her daddy’s good name and her own good looks to influence the Supreme Council. So, if it came to the two of them battling it out one on one, Twila had no doubt she could best Dorma.

Dorma simply gestured for Twila to enter the building where Mongo had gone. Twila complied, and found her lack of an answer empowering.

“Oh, that’s right. Your solution is to have the Alliance – our greatest enemy – come here and take over. Frankly, I would much rather die than surrender to them!” she railed as she approached Mongo and the rebel, who simply glanced at one another in reaction to her words.

“You’re the ignorant one,” Dorma countered. “You have no idea what’s really going on with this planet or within the Empire, and you certainly don’t have a clue about the Alliance or how they’re going to help, not rule, us.”

Twila stopped walking when she was in the middle of the room, surrounded by the rebellious trio. “You’re not going to shoot me, so you might as well put that gun away,” Twila stated matter-of-factly, looking to Dorma with assured and cool confidence.

“Is that right?” Dorma replied with her pistol still aimed menacingly in Twila’s direction.

Twila saw a window of opportunity and sought to take full advantage of it – Dorma had made the mistake of standing too close to a well-trained soldier. With reflexes quicker than anyone had time to react against, Twila spun on her heel and kicked the gun free from Dorma’s hand. A moment later, the room fell into utter darkness, no doubt due to the wise decision of the candle keeper to take away the only light source. However, Twila could make out a light gray rectangle that was the door, and she was determined to make her way there to escape.

But out of the darkness, a strong pair of arms grabbed her. They tumbled, fought and struggled for what seemed like the longest time. Yet in reality, it was only seconds before Twila was able to free her own side arm, and with the man still cloying at her to keep her captive, she shoved the

barrel into his body and fired. He instantly let her go, and she scampered to her feet, leaping over the threshold and into the warm night air. She ran as fast as she could back to where Mongo had parked his transport, all the while dodging laser fire herself. There was no time to return fire – her focus was on escape.

She was relieved to find the shuttle still had the canopy back, allowing her access. She climbed aboard, glancing back briefly to see Dorma still firing at her while in pursuit. The shots, however, bounced harmlessly off the vessel's sleek side. Twila closed the canopy and started the transport vessel. It rose slightly, hovering neatly a foot above the ground. Before taking off, she couldn't help but give the nearing Dorma a sarcastic little wave.

Better luck next time, traitor.

The commotion of the jet crash drew Lisa, Ginger and Cric up to the bridge and away from their so-far fruitless search for Jeff. The lights in that area of the ship flickered on and off while some smoke wafted into the corridor. At one point, the Explorer shook violently, and Lisa wondered if they shouldn't be dashing off to launch instead. Lisa hoped that maybe they'd find Jeff up there, too, wondering what was going on.

Her heart sank as she entered the bridge to find most of the usual crew there – some, no doubt, were still in the lower decks going through the line-ups - but no sign of Jeff. Though smoky on the bridge, her eye was then drawn outside to the launch deck and the smoking, black crater that was there. A group of tethered and suited rescue crew were already converging on the spot, and the Land Team zipped past them on their way back in.

It was Cric that asked what they all wanted to know. "What's going on?"

Newley fielded this one. "We had another unauthorized launch."

"Not another one of our ships," Ginger hoped.

Newley shook his head. "Not this time. But whoever took it, fired on the Land Team and the Explorer before crashing out there. I doubt the pilot survived."

"The spy?" asked Cric.

"Most likely," responded Hawkins, visibly a bit shaken from the recent events. "Unless he's gotten more help," he added grimly. "We won't know until we can identify the body."

"I'm afraid if neither of you have heard from Jeff since the meeting, we might have another problem," Cric began. That got Hawkins' and Newley's full attention.

“He never showed up to be prepped for the line-up. He’s missing. We’ve been searching the ship, but so far he’s not in any of the usual places – and even a few unusual ones.”

“What?” Hawkins shouted. “How come I wasn’t notified?”

“It didn’t seem like a big deal, at first,” Cric explained. “We thought maybe he’d just missed the call. But it’s been some time and we were just about to come up and tell you about it when all this happened.”

Lisa’s stomach felt like it was in knots. Something like that jet crash should have drawn Jeff up there with them. The fact that he wasn’t there worried her like never before and she could no longer make any plausible excuses in her mind as to why he would not be there. It wasn’t like him not to be in the center of the chaos.

“Uh-oh,” Newley added in a tone Lisa didn’t like and her stomach did another somersault. He picked up a laser pistol that had been lying on the console in front of him that she recognized as the type issued to members of the Voltron Force. “I have a feeling if we do a poll, you’ll all have your standard issue pistols.”

Lisa almost hated to ask, but she had to know. “Where did you find that one?”

“Discarded in the launch bay. It was used to kill the guards in that area, presumably by the one who stole that jet. That much we could tell. Unfortunately, he shot out the security cameras, so we can’t rely on the film to make an ID of the assailant.”

The implication was unmistakable, and Lisa felt sick to her stomach. Her eyes were drawn back out to the launch deck of the Explorer and the grisly recovery scene. Even if that was Jeff’s pistol it just couldn’t be true. She would never believe it.

“You don’t think Jeff—” Cric replied with disbelief, as Cliff entered the bridge.

“What about Jeff?” Cliff inquired without introduction.

At this point, Lisa was no longer listening to the men discuss the evidence that Jeff might be missing because he could actually have some part in the horrible series of betrayals going on within the Explorer. She took a few foundering steps back toward the door, her visage that of shocked disbelief. Coming to her senses somewhat, she turned and dashed out of the bridge, her dark hair flowing behind her like a silky flag in the wind as she sprinted down the corridor.

It can’t be true, she kept telling herself while blinking back tears.

She would never believe Jeff was a traitor, that he’d try to harm her or Hutch – it wasn’t his voice she’d heard! Or did it have to be? What if he’d simply been a party to it, someone who had been giving aid to the spy? Lisa instantly hated herself for second guessing it, but her heart and mind reeled with confusion. She reminded herself of her budding feelings for Jeff and why she felt that way - she’d always seen a strength and conviction in him that she admired, a fearless

confidence that nobody else on the team could match. Thinking of that convinced her that this man could not be capable of such treachery, that nobody could put on that convincing of an act. But then maybe her emotions were clouding her judgment.

What frustrated her above all, was she had been out of it when confronted by the spy anyway, given she'd been recovering from her own injuries, and couldn't be too sure either way. Perhaps it could have been Jeff and she just didn't want to see it then. It was no wonder they had Keira doing the line-up first – she'd talked to the man at length and while lucid. She barely let herself think that even if he wasn't the spy, maybe he was helping him. And perhaps Jeff put on such a show of resenting Keira simply because she was a threat to him.

No! It can't be true! She stopped and shook her head furiously as if to fling all the conflicting bad thoughts from her mind.

She'd find him. And she'd find out for herself.

“What happened?” Hazar asked. He dropped what he'd been doing to come assist Baki and Dorma, who were carrying, with some difficulty, a very injured Mongo through the door.

Dorma stepped back, glad to let Hazar take over support of Mongo – it hadn't been easy carrying him the distance they had to go, and she only hoped they weren't followed. This wasn't their main station of operations, but it was a critical hideaway, nonetheless.

She had to take a moment to catch her breath. “Twila was following him. I had her in our custody, but she escaped. And when he tried to stop her, she shot him.”

The two men carried Mongo over to an old sofa and gently laid him down. “They already know the Alliance is coming,” Mongo managed to wheeze out. He reached out and gripped Hazar's arm as well as he could, beckoning him to lean in closer. “I did get that last communication off to them like you'd wanted. I told Baki what they said.” He seemed not to have the strength to go on.

Hazar patted his friend's arm reassuringly. “Just rest. We'll get a doctor in here to take care of you.”

Hazar looked to Baki, who took that as his cue to find someone qualified to care for such an injury. He left abruptly.

“I'm sorry,” Dorma told Hazar, her voice breaking.

Hazar looked up at her curiously. “For what?”

“I had her right where I wanted her. I should have known she’d try to escape. I should have disarmed her right away – so many **stupid** mistakes –”

Hazar shook his head while busying himself with staving off the bleeding of Mongo’s wound by applying pressure. “It’ll do nothing to beat yourself up about it now. Twila is a cunning manipulator – it’s how she got where she is now.”

Dorma found no comfort in Hazar’s logic. “She’s going to go back and tell them, and then they’ll be all over this quarter. We’re going to have to move,” she suddenly decided.

Dorma paced about the room, rubbing her arm where Twila had kicked her. It was still incredibly tender to the touch. “Do you think they’ll really come for us? The Alliance, I mean.”

Though she wasn’t as cynical as most Drules when it came to trusting the Alliance, she still sometimes doubted that anybody was kind of heart enough to forgive the havoc their Empire had wreaked to put that aside and help them in their time of need. She wouldn’t have blamed them if they’d said no, and actually, had half-expected it. Her conversation with Twila brought to the surface once again the nagging worry that they were waiting on rescuers who ultimately would come to their senses and think better of it. Especially now that their risk was doubled, given the Empire was tipped off somehow and had more time to prepare, she worried once more that the Alliance might back out. The consequences of that would be devastating.

She stopped pacing for she realized Hazar was no longer engaged in conversation. She looked at her brother, sitting on the sofa beside his friend, no longer working on the wound. Rather, he simply sat there with his head bowed over Mongo’s still form.

She took in the scene and, in a heart wrenching instant of realization, knew Mongo was gone. She turned away from them, her shoulders rising and falling in rhythm with her sobs. Another good man, gone. Absolute hopelessness and sorrow overwhelmed her.

Countless announcements paging Jeff went unanswered. It was a big ship to search, and minutes soon ticked by into hours. Lisa was tired. Emotionally and mentally exhausted from the search and the doubts. Cric had caught up with her again, and they’d been searching together for some time. They were now in a hallway they and several others had been over before and found nothing remarkable. It felt like they were going in circles and getting nowhere.

They’d heard the jet wreckage was brought in and it had contained exactly one body, charred beyond recognition. It would take more time and science to reveal the deceased’s identity, but Lisa didn’t think she could bear the wait. It had also come to light that some other crew members were missing as well, and nobody could tell who might be victims and who might be the culprit, or even in cahoots with their internal enemy. There simply were no clear answers. The only thing

that was clear was that all the stress and paranoia of the last several months on the Explorer were coming to a head.

Lisa leaned against the wall and placed her hands on her temples. It was no use. She felt so hopeless and more confused than she'd ever been in her life.

Cric gently took Lisa in an embrace and squeezed his teammate reassuringly. "We'll find him, and it'll be okay."

Lisa had doubts if he was sure of that himself or if he was just being a good friend and consoling her. Regardless, she returned his embrace in earnest. Her head rested for a peaceful moment on Cric's arm as they maintained the embrace. It was then that something giving off a glint on the floor against the wall caught her attention.

"Cric, look!" she said breathlessly, standing back and pointing to the object. She hurried to it, plucking it off the floor. "It's my moonstone charm," she said, whirling around and showing it to him. "I gave it to Jeff as a good luck charm."

She could see the chain had been violently broken, as if it was ripped from around his neck. Lisa tried to push the idea out of her mind that he yanked it off himself in disgust before he went on a last treacherous rampage. No, that wasn't the Jeff she knew. There had to be some other explanation.

"I remember – he was wearing it when he met with the Commander. Cliff made some snide remark about it, actually," he added, remembering the amusing exchange.

"Ok, so that means he was here at some point."

Lisa had renewed hope that they were getting somewhere – getting close to finding out the truth.

The duo started looking around the hall, though there was nothing too remarkable about the area. A few doors, mostly leading to little more than storage closets, lined the corridor. But something did catch Cric's eye.

"Look at this."

Lisa followed his pale blue hand as it pointed out a small smudge of red on the wall near where he stood – a substance that was likely blood. Her eyes widened in alarm and a sense of urgency overwhelmed her.

Looking around, they noted several other subtle but tell-tale signs of a struggle. But where was Jeff? If he fought with someone, where could he be now? Of course, Lisa refused to fully entertain the worst possibility – that he wasn't responding to pages because he was on the losing end of whatever encounter took place. She thought back to how determined Jeff was to find the traitor and how she'd warned him not to do anything rash. She squeezed the moonstone in her hand tightly as she sorely hoped Jeff hadn't gone against her advice and paid a terrible price.

Others might say that maybe this was just evidence of someone getting in Jeff's way that he had to dispose of, but Lisa shook the notion out of her head. She'd believe in Jeff until they could prove to her unequivocally otherwise. Lisa vowed to waver no more in her faith in Jeff.

"At least there's no big pools of blood," Cric noted, likely in an effort to ease her fears. But somehow, she found the observation not that comforting. The attacker could have cleaned up after himself she reasoned. Since this was a somewhat well-traveled part of the ship, whatever happened here, happened fast. There wouldn't be a lot of time for drawn out and loud fighting or the trouble to clean up a messy scene.

Both turned when a muffled noise emanated from one of the closets down the hall. It sounded like something inside the closet had shifted and fallen over. They looked to each other wide-eyed for a moment before rushing to the door. Cric motioned for her to stand back, and he drew his pistol just in case. Lisa caught herself literally holding her breath while waiting for Cric to activate the door release.

They both jumped back as the door slid open and a small cascade of cleaning supplies came spilling out of the narrow, cramped closet. In addition, Jeff's listless body, which was bruised and battered, partially rolled out from where it had been stuffed into the small space.

In her shock, Lisa dropped the moonstone as her hands flew up to her mouth. It hit the floor with a clatter until it came to rest against Jeff's motionless form. She stared at him, her mind and body frozen in shock even though she wanted to look away. In her heart she knew as time went on this was likely how the search would end, and yet, nothing could prepare her for the pathetic sight of him lying there so broken and undignified.

His face was bruised and bloodied, as were his knuckles – it was too much to think of the injury his uniform hid. He'd surely been in a ferocious fight. But the worst of all was his neck – even above his collar, ugly bruising was evident under his jaw and Lisa knew whomever he'd fought with must have strangled him. And sure enough, his pistol was absent from its holster. The shock of the crime dwarfed any comfort that this cleared Jeff's name.

Lisa was barely aware of Cric paging a medic on a nearby intercom. "He has weak vitals. Hurry!"

She knelt down beside Jeff and gingerly stroked the side of his bruised cheek with the back of her hand. He did not react to her touch. He still felt warm, just like the tears that now freely flowed down her cheeks. Her pretty features were now contorted by an expression of heartbreaking grief and guilt.

How could I ever doubt you?

She began to softly sob while she tenderly ran her fingers through a tuft of his dark, shaggy hair, some of which was matted down with dried blood.

Only one word parted her lips, barely audible as it was. "Why?"

TO BE CONTINUED...