

Winning Days by Purrsia
Book I: Black Metallic
Part II

The robeast and Voltron hovered high above the city, ready to face off.

“Hold it, Jeff,” came Hawkins’ warning from the bridge of the Explorer. “We still may be able to talk our way out of this. I don’t want a single shot fired until I give the order, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Jeff responded, sweat dotting his brow beneath his helmet. His eyes never left the robeast. They may not be able to attack, but there was no order against evasive action and Jeff wanted to be ready for anything.

Hawkins surveyed the grim scene. A dull ache was already starting to creep into his temples, which was a sure sign of the stress headaches the Commander often was plagued with. It was little surprise - this situation was about as stressful as it got.

Once again, he had Sparks make contact with the natives. “This is Commander Hawkins of the Galaxy Alliance,” he said to the nervous looking fellow who appeared on the Explorer’s monitor. “We don’t wish to fight. There’s been a terrible misunderstanding. If you can agree to a cease fire, I’m sure we can work this out.”

The man scowled. “They warned us you’d try something like this...”

Hawkins sighed, having little doubt that the “they” he referred to were the Drules. It would certainly explain a lot. Like why these people, who had the appearance of simple farmers, were even in Drule ships. The Drules must have armed them and trained them to do their dirty work, hoping that when the Alliance discovered this planet someone on the Alliance side would jump the gun just as Jeff had. With the native’s head now full of Drule propaganda and Jeff’s rash attack reinforcing it, Hawkins had his work cut out for him. One thing he had to his advantage was the fact that he wasn’t dealing with hardened soldiers. So, it was likely they lacked true blood lust and didn’t really want to fight.

“If you retreat now and never return to Rilo,” the man offered, his voice shaking despite efforts to sound stern, “we won’t fire on you.”

Hawkins didn’t like the idea of leaving without compensating the people for their losses or leaving them with the impression that the Galaxy Alliance are invaders of any kind, but for now, getting out without further conflict was more important.

“Fair enough.”

Nerok’s eyes narrowed as he watched the action crawl to a standstill on the planet below via his own ship’s monitoring system. “What’s going on?” he barked at the soldier sitting behind the communications console.

“Nerok, sir, our spy on the Explorer has reported that Commander Hawkins has negotiated a peaceful exit. The Rilons have agreed to hold their fire while the Alliance escapes,” replied the Drule soldier.

“I don’t think so.” Nerok’s lips split into a sinister grin. Unlike conflicts he’d had with the

Alliance in the past, this time Nerok had several back-up plans ready to go. If all else failed, he didn't want them leaving with any hope of having their peaceful reputation intact. "I stowed away a few Purple Raiders with our men in them on Rilo for just such an occasion. There will be no ceasefire. Order them to attack!" Nerok chuckled with satisfaction, knowing if this didn't do the trick, he had one more ace up his sleeve.

As calm settled in the sky above, a strange feeling came over Keira. Not because of the hope for peaceful resolution. No, if the trusted seer was right about this much, it was surely the end. Rather, it was about going out making the most of your last moments, she decided, and so found herself dashing across the street to join the looters. She felt almost joyful as she skipped over debris to partake in the frenzy.

Her eye caught the store that housed the fine linens and jewels, and she pushed past the broken door to the inside. It had clearly already been ransacked, and so Keira had the place to herself. There was just enough light to see, and Keira rifled through the racks of fine gowns as well as what was left of the jewelry.

Once she'd found something to her liking, she shucked her old scratchy woolen dress that was such a drab gray right there in the middle of the sales floor to don a flowing white gown. It reminded her of something a high council member might wear. After putting on a sparkling necklace and matching bracelets, Keira approached a long mirror to see how she looked.

The sleeveless dress hung a little loose on her slender frame – especially at her shoulders – for it was made for an older lady, not a young woman just coming out of her teens. She did realize, however, why the upper crust of Rilon society preferred bright white fabrics as she studied her frame. The color of the garment truly accented the olive complexion, dark hair and eyes that are the norm for her people. She never would have believed it before, but lovely linen really did seem to transform her. She twirled before the mirror with delight, taking in her new look from every angle. Her parents made a modest living and so this was the most luxurious item of clothing ever to settle on Keira's skin. The gauzy layers of the skirt flowed upward and then gracefully hugged her legs as she twirled. She felt like a princess!

"If this is the end, I might as well go out in style," she whispered. The statement was followed by a totally inappropriate but uncontrollable bout of giggling.

The carefree moment evaporated when a flaming piece of wreckage slammed into the street, not too far from where she'd been standing moments earlier. Keira whirled around, the delight of the swirling fabric lost to her as a shock of fear brought Keira back to hard reality. She suddenly had serious doubts whether she could face the end of her world as stoically as she'd intended for true panic gripped her.

Jeff eyed the robeast warily, but wasn't about to disobey orders. If a ceasefire and a retreat were what the Commander ordered then that's what he'd get. Voltron turned, with the intention to head back to the Explorer. However, he didn't get far before laser fire tore at the back of him.

"What the hell? They're shooting us!" Jeff cried while struggling along with his comrades to

gain control of Voltron.

Struggle for control was in vain, for Voltron plummeted headlong toward the city below while a swarm of the Drule's deadly purple raider fighters dashed past. In the confusion, a Drule vessel manned by Rilons was also hit which only served to spark all-out war between them and the Alliance. The chance to leave without incident was seemingly lost.

Jeff braced himself for impact. "Hold on team! This is gonna hurt," he managed to say just before Voltron performed a sprawling crash landing. The robot took out countless city blocks with him as he slid on his belly to a halt. One of his mighty hands swiped the storefront of a linen store, unwittingly trapping one well-dressed native inside when the building partially collapsed.

Of course, nobody on the Voltron Force was aware of this or anything else going on around them. Voltron laid motionless, dust and debris settling all around him.

"Jeff, get out of there!" Hawkins shouted, only to be greeted by dead air as a response. "Damn," he cursed softly, while watching the purple raiders regroup for another attack on the helpless Voltron, all the while the Explorer itself was being rocked by blasts fired by the Rilons.

"What do you want us to do, Commander?" asked a nervous Sparks.

"They broke their word," Hawkins replied evenly, unaware that the sleek Purple Raiders responsible for the initial attack were actually piloted by Drules. "Open fire."

The fighting was fierce, blighting the early morning sky with a smoky haze that glowed with the fires of death and destruction. Though the counterattack by the Explorer and her fleet was enough to keep the Rilons and the Purple Raiders occupied, the robeast moved in to take advantage of Voltron's immobile state.

Inside the downed robot, Jeff slowly came back to his senses. The crash had knocked him out cold and it took him a moment to focus. The first sight that greeted him was that of the robeast on his ship's telecom with an instrument of impalement ready to strike.

"Team, we gotta move!" he croaked, pulling back hard on the two yokes that controlled Voltron's upward movements. Jeff couldn't move Voltron by himself, however, and so the damaged robot simply lurched slightly upward only to fall flat once more. He was aware of something warm running down his face that was more than mere perspiration, and what's worse was it started to obscure his vision.

He blinked, the robeast closing the distance to his horror. "Cliff, Cric, wake up – ya gotta help me out here before we become a robeast shish kabob."

A groan came over Jeff's intercom that sounded as if it came from Cliff and gave Jeff a spark of hope. "Cliff, come on buddy, we gotta move."

"Jeff?" came Cliff's reply, and to Jeff's dismay he sounded rather disoriented.

"I'm here too, Jeff."

Jeff bolted up right in his seat; ignoring the pain such sudden movement caused his battered body. "Cric! Pull up, pull up!"

The robeast was practically on top of them, bringing its weapon down in a sweeping arc. The Team leaders managed to take their controls. With just the three of them, Voltron's upward thrust was clumsy and awkward at best. But luckily, he moved up and aside just enough to avoid the brunt of the robeast's attack. Only the mid-section of his torso was grazed.

The weight of the robeast brought Voltron slamming back to the ground. Jeff knew that if the others didn't come to, this was only a temporary reprieve. The jarring of the impact must have done the trick though, much to Jeff's relief, more of the team came back online.

Ginger was among the first to report. "Jeff, I'm getting some preliminary data back. We're pretty banged up but most of our weapons and energy stores should still be good enough to fight

off this robeast. My ship is probably damaged the worst.”

It made sense to Jeff – her red jet, attached to Voltron’s chest, would have taken the brunt of the damage as Voltron slid to a stop after his graceless fall. “Thanks Ginger. Team, you know what we have to do.” And the first thing was to get out from under the robeast, which had Voltron pinned in a prone position on the ground.

The feat was impossible until a unit from the Explorer's fleet broke away long enough to risk blasting the robeast off Voltron's back. Their rescuers paid a heavy price, however, as out of battle formation it was easy for the enemy to pick it off.

Jeff had neither the time nor the luxury to mourn his fellow soldiers. Instead, he used the moment along with the rest of the Voltron Force to get upright and in a battle position. His next concern was getting away from the populated area. Ordering the team to use the ray beam whip, Voltron was able to grab the floundering robeast and fling the mechanical menace out and away. Voltron pursued it.

"Form blazing sword," Jeff growled, his only focus on destroying the robeast and ending this battle definitively.

Nerok crossed his arms across his chest, glaring at the oversized monitor looming before him. The tide in the battle on Rilo was changing. No matter. He had a last-ditch effort that would ensure the Alliance wouldn’t come away smelling like roses.

Long before the Alliance ever showed up – though he’d always banked on the fact that they would – Nerok had his men drill into the ground in remote areas of the sparsely populated planet to plant Lazon bombs he could detonate at any moment. It was easy, what with the people of Rilo so primitive they had no clue, nor would they question their “allies” anyway. And it was done for just this reason – if the Drules couldn’t take the planet nobody will, least of all the damned Galaxy Alliance. But the best part was, blame for its destruction would fall solely on the shoulders of the Alliance, proving to the fools who ally themselves with the Garrison what Nerok and the rest of the high Drule command always knew – the Voltron Force were imperialistic interlopers.

“Sir?” a nearby underling asked, as it was clear he’d been waiting some time for orders.

“Detonate the Lazon bombs and let’s get out of here. With any luck, they’ll die with the planet and if not...they’ll suddenly find it harder to make any friends in the galaxy after they take the blame,” Nerok decreed.

Jeff felt a rush of satisfaction as the robeast exploded into fiery oblivion before him. The feeling was fleeting, however, for Ginger's ship disconnected from Voltron without warning. Their union broken, the rest of Voltron split into the individual specialized ships that comprised the robot. Jeff maneuvered to stick close to Ginger whose ship was clearly out of control. The red fighter plane sank toward the planet, leaving a trail of swirling black smoke behind it.

“Talk to me, Ginger, what’s going on?” Jeff called via his radio. His frown deepened when no reply came. Switching channels, he brought up Cliff. “I’m going to stick with Ginger. You guys

try to keep everyone off our backs.”

“Will do.”

The only comfort was her ship seemed to be leveling out somewhat and it looked to him like Ginger was attempting an emergency landing back at the city – the streets Voltron had cleared earlier would serve as a fairly decent landing strip, albeit a bumpy one. But Jeff knew if anyone could pull off such a feat, it would be Ginger. As far as pure flying skill, Ginger was the best out of the lot of them.

Jeff’s confidence in Ginger’s piloting ability was forgotten when a series of explosions lit up the horizon. At first, he wasn’t sure if it was some kind of distant volcanic activity responsible for the events. But when the telltale mushroom shaped clouds drifted up through the atmosphere, he knew it had to be the work of men not nature – more specifically the Drules, as it didn’t make sense that the natives would bomb their own world. With Ginger out of commission and having to land below, that was enough of a problem...and now this! Jeff groaned audibly.

He guided his ship down behind Ginger’s all the while more explosions ripped the planet – some of which were too close as far as Jeff was concerned. Ginger’s ship came to rest in the street after a rather turbulent landing. Jeff leapt out of his ship into the rubble-strewn, deserted street and rushed over to Ginger’s ship. He arrived just as the canopy of her red fighter plane slid back.

“Are you okay?” Jeff asked, his voice filled with concern, yet muted, thanks to his helmet.

Ginger gave a quick nod. “I can’t say the same for my ship.”

Jeff climbed inside the cockpit just as another explosion rocked them. It was so intense, a nearby building, which was already half-destroyed from the earlier fight, shifted and threatened to bury them. It was then that something caught Ginger’s eye.

“Look!” she shouted, pointing out toward the unstable building. “Somebody’s up there.”

Jeff glanced up from the control panel he’d been trying to glean information from. Sure enough, a figure lay face down on the last third of the roof that remained on the structure. Before they could decide what to do, Hawkins radioed via Jeff’s portable communicator.

“Bad news, Jeff. The explosive activity on the planet has caused a catastrophic chain reaction. Professor Page warns that the situation is unsafe and unpredictable – we’ve got to evacuate before the planet becomes an inhospitable ball of fire.”

“Ginger and I are in the city. Her ship is grounded, sir,” Jeff replied.

“No time for that. You’ll have to tow it.” After a pause, Hawkins continued. “Are there any natives down there in the city?”

Jeff looked around and realized that Ginger had left the ship and was approaching the only person they had seen so far. “Just one person in sight, but it looks like they’re injured. Ginger’s checking on it.”

The air was starting to become thick with smoke and ash, but Jeff thought he could make out Drule ships at the other end of the city descending as if to land. He reported the information to Hawkins.

“Maybe they’re evacuating,” Hawkins theorized. “We’ve still got some fighters up here but when the explosions started many of the ships fell back.”

Something strange was happening and Jeff didn’t like it. The entire situation reeked of Drule treachery. “I hope so. We’ll make a sweep of the city on our way back just to be sure.”

Luckily, Ginger was making her way down the collapsed rubble of the building with the native in her arms. As they neared, Jeff could see why Ginger had a relatively easy time carrying her human cargo – compared to ginger, the native girl was quite petite. He almost thought the

victim might even be an older child until they got close enough to see she was indeed a young woman.

Jeff leapt down onto the wing of the plane to help gather the injured girl into the safety of the ship. The girl groaned and her eyes fluttered open intermittently, but for any practical sense of things, she wasn't aware.

No sooner had Jeff filled Ginger in on Hawkins' orders than another explosion – this one much closer than any before it – shook them. The remainder of the building the girl had been rescued from slid into the street causing chunks of stone to pelt and batter Ginger's already damaged ship.

"I'm going to fly above you and attach a grappling hook and line – I'll tow you," he shouted to Ginger before leaping down into the rubble to get to his own ship.

As Ginger sat in her seat waiting to be hoisted into the air, she glanced down at the girl on the floor. "We'll get out of here," she assured her, although she may have done so more to reassure herself than her semi-conscious companion.

TO BE CONTINUED...