

Winning Days by Purrsia
Book I: Black Metallic
Part III

Jeff sat in the medical lab, too deep in thought to flinch as Professor Page's assistant, Debbie, stitched his scalp wound.

They made it, but there was no way to tell how many Rilons could say the same. Everything had happened so fast; it was hard to believe they were safe on the Explorer, speeding away from Rilo, which, according to Professor Page, was fast becoming a raging ball of flame, smoke, ash and gas. Sadly, they only came away with the one native girl. While it appeared as he'd flown past that the ships he'd spotted landing on the south side of the city were indeed evacuating survivors, they wouldn't let any Alliance ships near to assist. Not that he could blame them - Jeff only hoped they made it off the planet in time. Still, what a shame it was for a people to lose such a beautiful world.

"You've had a serious enough concussion to render you unconscious, so we're going to want to monitor you closely for a couple of days," Debbie remarked casually as she worked.

"Huh?"

"Should be nothing to worry about," she assured him. "Standard procedure."

Truth be told, Jeff cared a lot less about his own head at the moment. It paled in comparison to what had just happened. Of all the rotten things the Drules had done, using an innocent people to further their evil cause topped it all. He didn't know how, but Jeff was determined to find out who masterminded the scheme and -

"Jeff, Commander Hawkins wants to see you in the captain's quarters when you're through - alone." Cliff's popping into the lab to make that announcement snapped Jeff out of his dark thoughts - and spun him into darker ones.

"Aw, great," he muttered under his breath. Debbie finished her task at that moment, and Jeff found himself wishing it had taken longer - anything to put off the Commander confronting him.

But Jeff knew being captain of the Voltron Force carried extra responsibility, and when things went wrong, he'd have to face the reprimand like a man. With that sobering thought, he muttered what passed as a thank you to Debbie and made his way to Hawkins' quarters.

When he arrived, Hawkins was seated at his desk, his hands under his chin with the fingers interlaced and his eyes closed. The small office was unlit, save for the glow Rilo gave off through the window as the planet entered its death throes.

Hawkins didn't look up at Jeff for a long moment, although he must have known of Jeff's presence. The silence made Jeff uneasy. What's worse was he had time to study the papers laid out in front of Hawkins and he knew by the telltale letterhead what they were - forms the Alliance used to notify loved ones back home that they'd lost someone dear to them in battle. He knew the form well for it once arrived at his home to inform his mother that his older brother - and only sibling - had become yet another casualty in the Alliance's long struggle with the Drule Empire. That was also the day, despite his mother's pleading, that he became determined to join the Alliance himself. Though she had been relieved when Jeff was assigned to the exploring expedition on the Explorer, the technical description he had as a space explorer hadn't saved him from deadly clashes with the Drules. Of course, he never let on in letters he wrote home exactly

how bad it was, but for all the trouble the Drules cause, the Explorer crew might as well be strictly an elite fighting force.

Hawkins remained silent, and Jeff shifted his weight nervously. He considered taking a seat but didn't dare push his luck. His eyes fell upon an open bottle of aspirin on Hawkins' desk. Jeff had a brief glimmer of hope that the long silence wasn't so much due to anger on Hawkins' part but maybe more a result of the headache that likely ailed him. Jeff also knew Hawkins took the death of any Alliance soldier in his fleet personally. Rather than simply calling in the names of those lost in the battle and letting Galaxy Garrison send an impersonal generic form letter, Hawkins always took blank forms and wrote out personal letters to each family and then sent them out himself. They were his men, and his responsibility in life and in death, as he had once told Jeff. And they'd lost quite a few men in the last battle. It wouldn't surprise Jeff if the Commander had a hell of a headache under the circumstances.

Hawkins had been so still and quiet for so long, that when he finally moved to bring his clasped hands down on the desk, Jeff startled before quickly changing to the stiff posture of a soldier at attention.

"Jeff?"

"Yes sir?"

"What the hell happened down there?"

Though Jeff didn't meet his gaze, he could sense Hawkins' glare on him all the same. He swallowed hard past the lump forming in his throat as if it might buy his mind time to race for an answer that wasn't utterly inexcusable.

"Well?" Hawkins rose to his feet as he spoke and rounded the corner of the desk so that he was standing at Jeff's side. Still at attention, Jeff stared straight ahead. The only silver lining was Hawkins had positioned himself so that the ugly death of Rilo was now hidden from his peripheral vision. "I asked you a question," he pressed, so close that his hot breath rustled Jeff's shaggy, dark hair.

"I'm sorry, sir, we just thought-"

"We?" Hawkins interrupted.

"I-I thought they were the Drules, sir."

To Jeff's relief, Hawkins stepped back and made his way to the window to stare at the catastrophe it framed. "So, we learned a valuable lesson today, didn't we? Things aren't always what they seem."

Jeff cleared his throat. "Right, sir."

"But what an expensive lesson that was to teach."

Silence fell in the room, and Jeff became keenly aware of his palms, which had become acutely sweaty. He'd never seen the Commander this upset, and he tried to push the idea of court martial out of his mind. He knew it would be well within the Commander's right to recommend it, but he'd hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"You are hereby relieved of your duties as captain of the Voltron Force."

The Commander's words came fast and stern, and they left Jeff feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. Any other day, he might be so bold as to try to reason with the Commander but all he could do was stand there, his face glowing hot with the sting of shame and embarrassment.

"You'll still have your air team unit but the task of leading the Voltron Force as a whole will now fall to Cric," Hawkins continued.

A feeble 'yes sir' was all Jeff could manage to choke out.

“You’re dismissed,” Hawkins added curtly, without glancing in Jeff’s direction.

With that, Jeff turned on his heel and left the captain’s quarters. He strode down the hall taking large, brooding steps with his eyes downcast. He was vaguely aware of a few passing teammates trying to get his attention, but he walked briskly past as he was feeling far too many emotions to satisfy their curiosities. They’d all know soon enough, anyway. All he wanted to do was get to his quarters and be alone, but it seemed like the longest walk of his life.

Jeff cringed when Ginger got in his path. He gritted his teeth, refusing to look her in the eye.

“Jeff, what’s wrong?” Her tone was gentle and sincere, but Jeff had no patience for pity at the moment.

He shoved past her, perhaps a little too hard. “Just leave me alone, would ya?” he growled before stalking off down the hall, leaving Ginger staring after him in disbelief.

Keira squinted as her eyes fought to focus against the bright lights. She groaned, shifting in the bed to try to find something familiar, something that would clue her in on where she was and what had happened. Slowly, her mind recalled pieces of events that happened after part of the textile store came crashing down around her. First there was darkness and choking dust...then, a light coming from above. She climbed and clawed her way to the light until she burst into the open air above, dragging herself onto the roof. That’s where she collapsed, tired and weak. She recalled seeing a stranger in a white helmet, then briefly another stranger clad in much the same way. She’d tried to speak, but it was no good for she kept fading in and out of consciousness. Her memory of being in some sort of transport was perhaps the fuzziest of all things that had happened to her since that morning. And now she was here...wherever that was.

Her eyes finally used to the light, Keira saw nothing comforting, nothing familiar. The walls around her were all a metallic, sleek grey – nothing like the whitewashed stone of home. Her pulse quickened. Had she been kidnapped? As she sat up, she discovered that the beautiful flowing gown she’d adopted was gone – as were the jewels – and replaced by some kind of generic looking two-piece cotton suit. Keira gulped. Who knew what they’d done to her while she was out.

Kicking the coverlets back, Keira decided she had to try to get out of there. However, her sore muscles and joints had protests of their own, which made Keira whimper audibly. To her chagrin, the white curtain that had been obscuring the bed from the rest of the sick bay came flying back with Debbie standing on the other side of it. Keira froze, her eyes wide and fearful.

“It’s okay.” Debbie’s words were tentative and soft. “We won’t hurt you.”

As soon as she moved toward her, Keira stumbled off the bed, and despite the discomfort, hobbled toward what looked to be a door. She studied the door in confusion, unable to figure out how one passed through it until its metal panels slid apart on their own, granting her an escape route. The unexpected motion startled Keira and she hesitated. Though Keira wasn’t the picture of swiftness, Debbie didn’t pursue her. Yes, it seemed odd to Keira that her captures would not stop her from escaping but when she stepped out into the hall, she understood why. Lining the opposite side of the hall was a row of impressive windows, which afforded her a view of the vast cosmos – not to mention what looked like a brilliant ball of fire.

The realization slowly dawned on Keira that she was not only trapped on this alien spacecraft, but that ball of fire was once her world. They’d destroyed it, just like the seer predicted! She crossed the hall slowly until she stood before one of the great panes, and pressed

her hands against the cool glass. Tears streamed down her face, and she sorely wished she were still on Rilo, dying with it. The fate she was dealt was certainly worse than death, of that she felt sure.

She had no idea how long she'd been standing there mourning her world and her people, but eventually a soft-spoken woman got her attention.

"I'm so sorry." Lisa spoke as if responsibility for the entire incident was resting on her shoulders, her own dark eyes glistening with tears. "We're sure some of your people escaped and we'll do everything we can to reunite you with them."

"Maybe she can't understand you," Marvin offered from where he loitered nearby.

Keira's eyes darted about. She was disquieted to find several Voltron Force members lingering in the halls. The urge to flee once again overwhelmed her.

"Stay away," she croaked haltingly before setting off in search of somewhere to go to escape the scrutiny of all these strangers.

"Guess she can understand you after all," Marvin remarked with an apologetic shrug.

Hutch rolled his eyes. "Any moron knows human-based civilizations on other planets are made up of people who migrated from Earth in the 2100s. I'm not surprised she understands our language."

The debate was lost on Keira as she tried to flee the company of the strangers. She was too overwhelmed to take solace in Lisa's calm reassurance, too shocked to do anything but want to get away. But go where? Her world was gone, too ruined by war and bombs for it ever to be livable again. Her people, if any survived, flung to the four winds. Keira moved along the passageway until she found a slight recess in the wall. It was there she hid herself, sitting on the cold metal floor and drawing her knees to her chest.

Cric entered the mess hall where some of his teammates had already gathered. The mood in the room was somber. He'd just returned from meeting with Hawkins and was rather disturbed by Jeff's demotion. Because of that, he wasn't surprised when he didn't spot Jeff among his colleagues.

He approached in time to overhear Ginger speak of Jeff's odd behavior in the hall earlier. Of course, Cric now knew the cause of the outburst, but he wasn't about to break the news to them yet. Instead, Cric decided to speak about something else that had been troubling him.

"The whole conflict was strange," he began, his eyes growing distant as his mind drifted back to the confrontation and the horrible battle.

"It was a Drule trick, simple as that," Cliff stated, with Ginger nodding in agreement.

Cric paused before continuing. "I think it goes deeper than you're thinking, Cliff. I don't think the Drules simply wanted some simple people to do their fighting for them. They wouldn't have bothered just to save a few of their own soldiers – not with the time it would take to train those people."

"What are you saying?" Ginger wondered.

"Think about it. There was no reason for that planet to self-destruct like that. We would have detected seismic activity in our initial exploration if that were the case. Those explosions at the end were bombs – I'm sure when the data from our ships is analyzed it will confirm it. Not only that, but at the end of the fight, there was more Drule ships in the sky than there should have been. That city was the only populated area we saw and I just can't see that there would be

enough people living in it to man that many ships.” He stopped and gauged his friends for their reactions, letting them put the pieces together on their own.

“So...they’re hoping we take the blame for it all, is that it?” Cliff proposed.

Cric nodded. “I believe so. After all, it’s always been their position that we’re the aggressors, not them. What better way to prove it?”

“Surely no one will believe them over us!”

Cric was unmoved by Cliff’s protest. “That’s the beauty of it – it’s not the Drules people are going to have to believe. Not with a frightened people scattered about out there telling their story to anyone who will listen about how the Drules helped them try to save their world from us.”

Cric sighed. “Our long-time allies will stand by us, I’m sure. The bad part is we’re a long way from most of them. We’re in the Drule’s corner of the universe where we need all the friends we can get.”

Ginger still looked skeptical. “Wouldn’t the worlds in this part of the galaxy know all about the cruelty of the Drule Empire?”

Cric shook his head. “Not necessarily. Those they enslave are too oppressed to spread warning and there are so many worlds in any given galaxy it’s entirely possible for there to be areas where neither the Drules’ nor the Alliance’s reputations are well known.”

Ginger’s brow creased with worry. “And we played right into it. Poor Jeff...” she added. “He must be taking it hardest of all.”

“More than you know,” Cric replied with regret. He decided he couldn’t put off the troubling news any longer. “The Commander wanted me to tell you that- that I’m now captain of the Voltron Force.”

Cliff and Ginger shared a shocked gasp.

“What?” Cliff demanded, loudly enough to attract other team members in the area. Sammy, the staff cook who was wiping down the counters, even glanced up.

Cric cleared his throat, his unease apparent. “Yes, Jeff was demoted from his position as captain of all the teams. Though he will remain in command of the air team,” he hastily amended.

Ginger brought a hand up to her crimson lips and shook her head in disbelief. “Poor Jeff,” she repeated.

For Cliff’s part, he was over the shock and had moved on to anger. “I don’t agree with Jeff jumping the gun, but this is a little bit harsh don’t you think? I’m going to talk to the Commander!”

Cric quickly stepped in his way. “I wouldn’t recommend it.” With the mood Hawkins was in, Cric would be afraid to ask him what he wanted for dinner much less question his orders at this point. Cliff would be wise to avoid him.

The team leaders stared one another down until Cliff relaxed. “Fine. But this isn’t going to be permanent. Eh, no offense,” he offered hastily to Cric.

Cric held up a hand and shook his head to show none was taken. “I understand. I don’t like it either. But right now, things are what they are.”

With that, Cric looked out at Rilo, the fiery sphere getting smaller and smaller. He wished he could offer his teammates some words of comfort, but the truth was, Cric had a gut feeling the worst of their worries was yet to come.

*I've never seen you when you're smiling
It really gets under my skin
You say it's easy when it's faster
I still can't guess what you're after*

*It's the colour of your skin
Your skin is black metallic
It's the colour of your skin
Your skin is black metallic*

*I think of you when you're sleeping
Of all the secrets that you're keeping
You can't stay all day under the covers
'Cause under there you'll discover*

*It's the colour of your skin
Your skin is black metallic*

-- Black Metallic, Catherine Wheel