

Winning Days by Purrsia
Book III: There's No Other Way
Part I

Bathed in the blue glow of the tractor beam, Keira stared in wide-eyed wonder as the docking bay door to the Drule command ship opened and she was guided in. She closed her eyes and wept openly as the ship touched down, feeling true relief for the first time since the tragedy on Rilo.

When the ship stopped moving, she opened her eyes again and worked off the confining space helmet, letting her hair spill out. For a brief moment, she panicked not knowing how to open the ship's canopy, but to her relief, it slid back on its own. Poking her head up she looked down to see several Drule soldiers surrounding the ship, all of their faces obscured by the headgear they wore. All except for one rather chubby, platinum haired man, who was looking up at her and the ship with a very pleased look on his face. She found him familiar, given she'd seen him in her village on Rilo – he'd been the one who helped her people train to defend themselves and her heart swelled with joy. He was a true friend. He hadn't forgotten her people after all! Of course, the idea that he only cared about the ship and not a whit about her never entered her mind. She was too taken by the emotion of the moment to consider that she might be a mere pawn, being used and manipulated to Nerok's advantage.

"Friend," his voice boomed up at her. "Come down here so that you may be rewarded for your service to the Drule Empire."

Keira felt claustrophobic inside the small jet fighter's cockpit and was more than happy to comply, that is, after a brief struggle to climb down.

No sooner did her booted feet hit the smooth metal floor of the hangar, than Keira was off, dashing toward Nerok. Nearby Drule guards were unsettled by her sudden movements and raised their pistols slightly, but lowered them immediately at the subtle wave of Nerok's hand. However, not even he was prepared for the girl's next act, which was to fling herself arms wide at him and engulf him in an embrace.

She didn't seem to mind the fact that Nerok simply stood there stiffly, not returning her gesture and in fact, looking rather uncomfortable. "Oh, thank you," she sobbed into his chest, her words slightly muffled.

When it was clear the girl might be content to cling to him for eternity, Nerok awkwardly took her by the upper arms and plied her off of him. She seemed unfazed, her dark moist eyes staring up at him, filled with gratitude and relief. "Eh, well yes, you will receive a great reward for what you have done."

Keira blinked, the idea having never truly crossed her mind. Hurting her captors and gaining her freedom was all she'd been in it for. She knew she should say something else to this great man, but her mind failed to find fitting words – she merely silently berated herself for continuing to gape up at the man with her jaw slack.

“You,” Nerok barked at a nearby soldier. “Escort our guest to fitting quarters. Make sure she’s given anything she desires.”

Keira took a step back and bowed slightly to show her appreciation to Nerok. Getting out of that wretched Alliance suit and getting some food sounded good to her. The soldier walked briskly to Keira’s side and waited for her to follow his lead.

Nerok barely seemed to notice for he continued to ease back into his element as he ordered around those in the room who were swarming the stolen ship like ants on a sweet treat. “Analyze this thing quickly,” Nerok ordered, “and when you’ve taken all the information you can from it – destroy it.”

Keira walked out of the hangar with the soldier, a new spring in her step as she thought about how the Alliance would soon trouble none of them any longer.

Outside, the battle raged. Luckily, the reinforcements from the base helped just enough to keep the tide from turning for the worst for the Alliance – though the losses on both sides were reaching staggering proportions. There were more Drule fighters in the air than Jeff had ever seen in one place in his life – they’d come prepared for this. But they all knew they had to get Ginger’s ship back, and the only way to do that was to fight their way into the Drule command ship where the fighter jet had been guided.

Cric’s voice came cracking over the intercom echoing Jeff’s thoughts. Jeff’s and Cliff’s teams were to try to get Ginger’s ship back while his team tried to clear a path and keep the robeast Nerok had just launched at bay. Jeff knew it was a fight against time for the Sea Team’s Aqua Fighter could only do so much against a robeast of that massive size. They couldn’t fail in bringing Ginger’s ship back.

With a look of renewed determination etched on his face, Jeff brought his ship into a deep dive directly toward the Drule command ship – and again, seemingly forgetting about Ginger who had to hang onto the back of Jeff’s chair to keep from being flung about the cockpit. It wasn’t easy, and they took a few hits, but just as Jeff hoped, his teammates and Cliff’s team helped clear a path for him.

“We’re goin’ in,” he announced as he trained his ship’s lasers on the docking bay door of the massive Drule vessel. Firing, the lasers tore a gaping hole in the side of ship, taking out most of the outer bay door.

Jeff fought to keep his ship steady as it endured more assaults from those fast and deadly Drule Purple Raider ships. Finally, he’d reached the relative, if temporary, calm of the inside of the command ship, landing near an interior door that would lead to the docking bay. Glancing at his radar, he saw his teammates and the Land Team were close behind.

“We’re in, Cric. Keep ‘em off our backs for a minute will ya?”

Cric’s worried countenance filled Jeff’s telescreen. “We’ll try.”

Turning to Ginger, Jeff asked, “You ready?”

Ginger nodded solemnly.

“We’ll go on foot. If we blast our way in with this thing, we’ll risk destroying your ship,” he explained as they prepared to disembark. “Stick close to me,” he added. “We didn’t exactly knock softly, so the place is probably going to be swarming with Drules.”

“Okay,” Ginger replied as she jumped down from the ship and drew her laser pistol.

They both turned as the other teams arrived and waited for them to join up.

Jeff paused before he opened the interior door, and looked back at the rest of the Air and Land teams. “Ginger and I will try to get to her ship – the rest of you, cover us.”

His request met with solemn nods, Jeff slapped the door release and it slid open.

Sure enough, Ginger’s ship was docked within – and it was heavily guarded. The intruders were noticed immediately, and a hail of laser fire ensued. The Teams fanned out and did their best to clear a path for Jeff and Ginger.

After an exhaustive firefight, they finally made some headway, inching closer to their stolen vehicle. It wasn’t without a close call or two, but so far, nobody on their side was mortally wounded. The same could not be said for the Drules.

A few Drules, however, retreated back into the ship and Jeff had no doubt they’d return tenfold and freshly armed, so he knew they had to work quickly. When he and Ginger finally reached the fighter plane and worked their way up to the open cockpit, he was dismayed to see the electronics had been tampered with, having been partly dismantled. Keira was nowhere in sight.

“Try to fire it up,” he told Ginger, hoping in vain it would at least be sky worthy enough to get it out of there.

Ginger took her place in the pilot's seat and almost immediately noticed something out of place. Reaching down, she plucked an alien device out from under the main control panel.

Jeff snatched the item out of her hand and looked it over with contempt. He figured this was the little piece of trouble that made it so hard to regain control of the ship and also how Keira managed to "pilot" the ship. He wasn't sure who he was angrier with – Keira or the spy behind all her mischief. Jeff was going to toss the item away in disgust but thought better of it at the last minute, thinking it would benefit them later to analyze the technology and maybe modify all of Voltron's components to counter it so that the Drules couldn't pull a stunt like this ever again. Not to mention it might yield clues as to their spy's identity.

His attention turned back to Ginger's effort to start the ship, and dishearteningly, to no avail. He supposed it was too much to hope for given the condition of the vehicle and he feared they had no time for repairs. He was considering towing her back to the Explorer, when he got an urgent message from Cric over his portable communicator. It was not going well outside against the Robeast, and Cric's team was taking on considerable damage. They needed Voltron.

Ginger had heard Cric's pleas as well and looked up at Jeff with a look of hopelessness on her face. Jeff knew how she felt but they had to try – if they towed her back and waited for the repairs on the Explorer, they risked losing the Sea Team as it would simply all take too long. Turning, he spotted the rest of his team on the ground keeping a watch for more Drules. Among them, he saw who he was looking for – the small, bespectacled member of his crew, Chip. The guy was a whiz at electronics and if anyone could jerry rig the ship to fly in a pinch, it'd be him. He was their only chance.

"Chip!" Jeff called down. "We need you up here, now."

Chip complied, scurrying up into the cockpit. "Yeah, chief?"

"Think you can do something with this to get her in the sky?" Jeff asked hopefully, gesturing to the trashed compartment and instrument panel. He wasn't encouraged by Chip's crestfallen expression. "You gotta try, little buddy. Cric's hurtin' out there."

Chip looked grim, but determined. "I'll give it a shot. Cover me."

"Oh," Jeff added as an afterthought, "check it out for any nasty surprises the Drules may have planted on it for us." He wasn't sure they'd have had time to booby-trap it, but with the Drules, one could never be too careful.

"Gee, thanks," Chip replied with notable sarcasm. "Move out of the way and give a guy room to work."

Ginger and Jeff climbed out of the cockpit and stood vigil on the nose of the ship, ready for the rush of Drule soldiers they were sure would come bursting in any minute. Jeff frowned as he saw several Land Team members, including Cliff, heading for the same door he'd saw the Drule soldiers retreat out of earlier.

“Cliff, what are you doing?” he asked into his communicator.

Cliff sounded almost apologetic in his reply. “Cinda doesn’t want to leave without Keira,” he explained into his own communicator. “So, her and I and MODOCH are going to see if we can locate her while you work on the ship.”

“What!” Jeff shouted almost loud enough for Cliff to hear him without the communicator, as Ginger winced. “She chose her side, Cliff. I don’t want you risking your neck for the likes of her.”

“Sorry, Jeff,” he replied. “But I have to agree with Cinda. To leave Keira with the Drules would be inhumane – we’ve got to try. She can’t have known better.”

Jeff’s jaw tensed for he hated the idea of the risk at a time like this, but he could no longer pull rank over Cliff and so he was powerless to stop him. Everyone acted like Keira was this poor naïve thing when they had no way to know if she truly was. What if she knew full well what she was doing? Why didn’t anyone ever consider that? Sure, he felt bad for what happened to the girl’s world, but enough was enough. “Just promise me you’ll forget this crazy idea and get back here once we get Ginger’s ship fixed. Cric needs us more than anyone else does,” he said, resisting the urge to label Keira a traitor.

“Right,” Cliff agreed before disappearing with the rest of the trio through the door.

Cric had one of his feelings again – a very bad, foreboding one this time. Deep down he knew the futility of the situation, even as he guided the smoking, limping Aqua Fighter back around for another go at the Robeast. It was like staring death itself in the face. Yet, it was not himself he felt sorry for, but his teammates who were along for the ride. He didn’t doubt their allegiance to the Alliance and their will to fight was as strong as his, and yet he couldn’t help but feel he should be sparing them such a horrible fate.

He gritted his teeth as they barreled down on the massive Robeast, its robotic and numerous tentacles flailing threateningly, and he hit it with the heaviest fire power they could muster. But once again, they barely made a dent in the beast. In fact, the only thing they succeeded in doing was getting themselves near enough to it to take another brutal beating from it. One of its tentacles struck out as the Aqua fighter passed, sending a shock through the entire ship.

This time, however, the tentacle ripped a gash into Lisa’s ship, and as it did so, released a series of dart-like objects into her ship, including the cockpit. The sting of the shock was forgotten as Cric tried to keep in contact with Lisa, whose ship was so badly damaged in the assault he had trouble keeping her online. What concerned him more was Lisa’s condition. She’d clearly been hit in the assault and was struggling to cope with her injuries. His first instinct was to get her back to the Explorer, but she refused. He understood why, of course. She knew as well as he did

that if they retreated, the Robeast may turn its attention to the remaining teams in the command ship and as vulnerable as they were down there, they wouldn't stand a chance.

Cric closed his eyes and tried to not be overwhelmed by the hopelessness of it all. Hawkins, having witnessed the last incident from the Explorer urged Cric to bring his team in. But for the first time in his career in the Alliance he openly defied the order, and gained sudden insight into why Jeff had so often had done the same.

"Team, are you with me?" he asked his comrades.

Even the suffering Lisa answered with heart and determination, and Cric knew why he loved the Alliance and their cause, bless their brave souls. None of them were willing to abandon their friends – not without giving it everything they had – even their own lives. Of course, he'd have to scrap what he was going to do next, which was to have his unit disengage at the last minute, for he was unsure if Lisa could effectively pilot on her own now. But, there was always plan B.

The Aqua Fighter made a wide arc as it turned to approach the deadly beast once more, and Cric made peace with the idea that it may be the last thing he ever did.

Back on Drule, Dorma paced by the desk in her brother's office, hoping his last-ditch effort to reach some of the more reasonable council members after the meeting had adjourned was going well. She'd made up her mind that if this didn't buy him time and he had to follow through with being exiled on the desolate Dreska, she would not let him go alone. She would go with him.

The door to the office slid open, but instead of Hazar gliding through the opening, it was Viceroy Throk, and Dorma couldn't help but let her lip curl slightly in contempt. To think – at one time she actually fancied and admired that man. Nothing could be farther from the truth now. Not since she'd seen how Throk's selfishness took precedence above all things – even the safety and wellbeing of the Drule citizens.

"What are you doing here? Where's Hazar?" she snapped at him, no attempt made to hide her contempt.

Throk's eyes raked over her from head to toe, and it sent a chill down Dorma's spine. "He's being shown to the launch bay in preparation for his vacation to Dreska, my dear Dorma."

His patronizing tone and sarcasm made Dorma's blood boil, and she balled her hands into tight fists at her side. "How dare you – get out!"

Amusement danced in Throk's eyes. "I always liked that about you, Dorma. You're so spirited.

She simply glared at him.

“However,” he continued, “this is no longer Hazar’s office so I think I’ll stay where I please if you don’t mind.” He idly studied a nude statue near where he stood. “I have to admit, your brother is lacking in taste. I’ll certainly have the place retooled.”

Snarling, Dorma charged at Throk, though he easily stopped her fist from making contact with him.

“Such a temper, my dear. Too bad you never put that much energy into fighting the Alliance,” Throk sneered, gripping her wrist with such force she couldn’t help but wince and wimper. He finally let go, and Dorma rubbed the limb while holding her glare on Throk.

“I’ll leave you to your new office, then,” she relented, but with contempt evident in her voice. “I’ve got a ship to catch.”

She wanted to dash out before Throk saw her tears, but he stopped her by pulling her close.

“My dear, why would you share in Hazar’s cold and lonely fate when you could have all the warmth and luxuries your heart desires here...with me?” His eyes dropped to her chest, where her uniform exposed part of her cleavage and she detested the lustful tone in his voice. Throk was a handsome enough Drule, and yet the idea of him touching her in a sexual way made Dorma absolutely ill, and her threatening tears were forgotten. His face hovered dangerously close to hers now, and if he dared kiss her, she would surely be sick. Ironically, in another time and era, she longed to please him and would have wholeheartedly welcomed the advances. How little she cared now about what he thought of her or whether he desired her or not.

“Pig,” she spat, pushing away from his offending embrace. “I’d rather die than warm your bed again.” Nothing but contempt burned in her heart for her former lover now.

It was Throk’s turn to snarl as he backhanded her hard across the cheek. She stumbled back, reeling from the impact. “You stupid bitch,” he shouted, as Dorma dabbed at the blood that began to form from the corner of her mouth. “Be careful what you wish for.”

The stunning effect of the slap wore off quickly enough and Dorma regained her composure. She boldly brushed past Throk, determined to make it to Hazar without further incident. It crossed her mind that he might be drunk enough on his own power to forcibly have his way with her or even kill her, and despite the fact that she was a trained soldier she was unarmed at the moment – and strength for strength, she knew she was no match for Throk. And given the unfavorable light her family was currently in politically, she didn’t doubt Throk could get away with crimes against her. She would have to swallow her pride and let this go – for now.

“Remember,” Throk chided as she left, “you’ve picked the losing team. Even now, Nerok is finishing off the Voltron Force and has gained the secrets of Voltron. If Hazar was half the man you seem to think he is, he could have saved us a lot of time and energy doing the same a long

time ago instead of stupidly trying to make peace. Just think of that while you're languishing on Dreska, cut off from your people, your heritage, and your glory."

Dorma paused for a moment, considering a tart comeback but quickly thought better of it. Arguing with a fool like Throk would waste time she didn't have, not to mention tempt fate. And so, without a word, she left him there to gloat over his new office space and headed for the hangar where she knew Hazar would be preparing to leave Drule forever. And it was then, when she dwelled on Hazar's fate and that of her people, that the tears came.

Cliff and his two teammates didn't get too far inside the command ship when they were met with a fresh batch of Drule soldiers who were storming down the hall toward them. Keeping low and close to the wall they returned fire as best they could, but Cliff knew they were outnumbered and would eventually have to retreat back to the hangar regardless of Cinda's feelings concerning Keira.

He was about to vocalize his concerns to Cinda and Modoch when Jeff came over his portable comm. He'd hoped it would be good news about the jet fighter, but instead it was more bad news. More Drules, it seemed, had stormed the hangar from another entrance and Jeff and his team – along with the remainder of the Land Team – were under heavy attack. What's worse, Jeff reported that all contact had been lost with Cric's team, though the Explorer still reported a visual on them. It wasn't good. It was, in fact, the tightest spot Cliff could recall them ever being in.

He motioned for his crew to retreat, and after what felt like an eternity and several laser fire singed close calls later, they'd fought their way back to the hangar where the others were. Rocky at least had the good sense to go back for his ship and roll it into the main hangar, where he began making fresh barbecue out of the Drules as they entered.

He took advantage of the extra cover to rush over to the fighter jet, where he spotted Jeff on the ground near the wing, his teammates sticking by the door and ensuring those Drules were held at bay. When he got closer, he saw who Jeff was standing over. Cliff couldn't help but gasp at the sight of Hutch, his teammate, lying on the ground with a gaping laser wound in his side.

"What the hell happened?" Cliff blurted, despite the obvious nature of what had taken place.

When Jeff turned to look at him, Cliff could see fresh tears in his eyes. "He was making sure Rocky could make it back to his ship and one lousy Drule got too close..."

Cliff swallowed hard. Hutch was writhing in pain, and it didn't look good for him. It was the worst injury he'd ever seen on any of the Voltron Force members, and he hated to admit it, but he'd seen others with far less severe injuries not make it.

“We’ve got to get him back to the Explorer a.s.a.p.” Cliff decided. “What about this thing?” he asked, gesturing at the jet fighter.

“Still a no-go,” Jeff admitted with considerable aggravation. He knelt by Hutch, doing his best to stay the bleeding and patch the wound. Only a moment later all of them were startled by the roar of the jet fighter’s engine, with Chip’s cry of triumph barely audible above the din.

Cliff looked up to see Ginger had Chip in a tight embrace, before gleefully taking her place in the cockpit.

Chip jumped down to ground level with the others. “It’s not 100%, but it’ll do for now.

“Great,” Jeff said with relief. “Tell the others to get ready to launch out of here. Cliff and I will get Hutch back to his ship.”

They each took an arm and did their best to support Hutch without causing him any more pain. Cliff didn’t like the glassy look in Hutch’s eyes at all. He was going into shock and looking far too pale. “Don’t worry, buddy,” he said as they carried him. “We’ll get you back to the Explorer and the doc will get you patched up in no time.”

Hutch shook his head. “Cric...Voltron...”

Cliff and Jeff exchanged worried glances. They finally reached the Turbo Terrain Fighter, and eased Hutch into his ship. Despite assuring Hutch they wouldn’t return to the Explorer, Cliff cast Jeff a look that said otherwise. Being combined in their sub-unit such that they were, Hutch wouldn’t have a choice, but Cliff felt it did no good to upset him, thus the fib. Before leaving, Cliff flipped Hutch’s ship on auto pilot as they would have to separate just before docking at the Explorer, and at that point, he wasn’t sure if Hutch would be lucid enough to pilot on his own.

“What a mess,” Cliff muttered.

“Tell me about it,” Jeff replied before they went their separate ways to take to the air.

Neither of them was prepared for the scene that greeted them in space, after fighting their way out of the Drule command ship. Cliff gasped when he located the Sea Team, its cohesive unit reduced to a fiery piece of wreckage plummeting through space with the Robeast in pursuit. “Jeff, we have to do something,” Cliff shouted over the intercom.

But it was no use – they were too far away to be within an effective range. As much as he didn’t want to see his friends snuffed out by the mechanical beast, Cliff found he couldn’t take his eyes off the scene. The robeast produced some kind of spear, much like Voltron’s own solar combat spear, and drove it skillfully at the Aqua Fighter. Contact appeared to be made squarely, and Cliff cried out in anger and despair, his cockpit lighting up with the energy of the impact.

Keira had just gotten settled into her room – which was much nicer and inviting than what she'd been given inside the Explorer – and was going to put in a request for something to eat when the ship rocked violently. She assumed the fighting was simply escalating outside until she overheard Nerok page her escort to his battle station – the Voltron Force had breached the ship.

“You, stay here,” the soldier ordered before leaving.

She nodded numbly, hoping they'd protect her from them. However, as the minutes ticked away and the battles intensified outside the ship as well as inside, she wondered if she didn't just risk her neck only to be killed anyway. Keira paced about in the room and tried to take her mind off the situation, but it was no good.

Against her better judgment, she ventured outside the room, and cautiously retraced her steps back to the hangar. It was quiet now as she neared the hangar, and that worried her. There in the hall, she stopped short. It was littered with dozens of Drule soldiers. Some of them writhing and moaning in pain, others not moving at all. She gasped, for she'd never seen such an aftermath of a battle and the gore and suffering that followed. Keira leaned back against the wall for a moment, feeling temporarily dizzy and nauseous from it all. Worst of all, she recognized one of the dead as the man who'd been her escort earlier.

She nearly jumped out of her oversized Alliance suit when a hand reached out and grasped at her leg. Looking down, she saw it was one of the injured that had crawled to her.

“Help,” he gasped, in a nearly inaudible rasp.

She glanced around surprised nobody else had come to help the downed men. Kneeling down, she helped the young Drule work off his helmet. He was bruised and battered, but the most severe injury was some profuse bleeding from his upper leg. She was no medic, but she'd always heard pressure stayed the bleeding, so she decided that's the least she could do in the hopes that someone more qualified would show up soon. Keira felt bad when the man cried out in pain when she first applied pressure. Then they both sat there awkwardly, the only sounds being the man's ragged breaths and the groans of his comrades that still lived. She only looked down at her hands once, and felt sick again when she noticed the gloves she wore were already soaked bright red with blood.

By this time, Keira realized the Alliance must be gone already – it was far too quiet now for them to still be inside the ship. Though relieved at the notion, she felt strange to be in this predicament. She could think of nothing else to do to pass the time other than make small talk.

“I-I'm Keira,” she started tentatively. “What's your name?”

The wounded soldier looked at her through half open eyes. “Sandu,” he huffed between ragged breaths.

Jeff watched the Sea Team's demise with his jaw slack with disbelief. They had been too late!

A moment later, he realized the flash of energy was from the Sea Team separating into their units just in time and he exhaled with great relief. A grainy image of Cric's weary face flashed on Jeff's monitor.

"We can't hold out any longer. Let's form Voltron and finish this," Cric declared.

Jeff thought of Hutch and hesitated. Originally, he'd just planned to try to get out of there and retreat, but there were still a lot of Drule fighters about and that robeast was faster than most. The likelihood of being able to flee in the Explorer in one piece was slim. Cric was right, but he shuddered to think about it costing Hutch his life.

"How's Hutch?" Jeff asked of Cliff, after getting him on another channel.

"Not good," came Cliff's blunt reply. "He's fading in and out. We should take our chances and retreat before our stalling kills him."

Jeff didn't think Cric could look anymore stressed out until he overheard Cliff's comments. "Look," the alien replied with newfound determination. "We're all beat up too, and Lisa's not in great shape herself. She took a horrendous hit."

Jeff's eyes went wide, and he fought the urge to blurt something in outrage.

"But," Cric continued, "trust me when I say this robeast is like none other we've dealt with before and it's not going to let anyone or anything retreat in one piece. Even if we did make it back to the Explorer, it'd cut that to ribbons, too. There's no other way. We have to risk it and form Voltron."

Cliff scoffed. "Bold of you, team leader, to take gambles with other people's lives."

Cric was visibly annoyed. "We don't have time to argue. Lisa's willing to take the chance and if I know Hutch, he wouldn't want to go out running from the Drules. While we've been chatting, the robeast has decided to attack the Explorer. Look!"

Sure enough, Jeff could see the beast nearing their interstellar home. The robeast operators must have thought the Sea Team was finished, too, and decided to mop up with the Explorer. Sadly, the Explorer's defenses were doing nothing to stave off the beast. Though it was clear Cliff still didn't entirely agree, he reluctantly separated his team's unit and used the autopilot to take over Hutch's ship as he was no longer responsive. Jeff didn't feel great about it either, but Cric was right. They had no choice, and if it were up to him, he'd have wanted them to stay on and fight.

The ships quickly gathered in their classic formation, stacking together to become a fighting force to be reckoned with.

The battle wasn't easy with injured teammates and damaged ships - and Voltron took a few good lumps. But once the Robeast was finally destroyed, the tide of the battle turned and Nerok eventually retreated. An almost typical victory had it not been such a precarious road to get there.

Jeff sat with the others outside the sickbay in the Explorer with the others, the post-battle calm marred by worry for the two most injured teammates – Lisa and Hutch. At least Lisa was still aware after all was said and done. Hutch, however, was recovered from his vehicle no longer breathing. It didn't look good. There had been many times that Jeff felt like raking his knuckles across Hutch's jaw, but even so, he hated to see any of his teammates so bad off. The guy may be prone to shoot his mouth off, but his heart was almost always in the right place. Jeff just hoped they could save him.

Most of the Sea Team was in a nearby room getting treated for minor injuries, except for Cric, who Jeff noticed was farther down the corridor. He stood, arms clasped behind his back, as he stared out at the now-calm cosmos. Cric hadn't come out of it unscathed, and Jeff worried as to whether he'd been checked over for his injuries. Jeff was about to rise from the bench he occupied when he saw Cliff brush past and Jeff had a good idea where he was heading.

Jeff followed closely behind as Cliff strode up to Cric. For Cric's part, he didn't turn to greet either of them. "Nice job, team captain," Cliff snarled with obvious sarcasm. "Thanks to you, one of my guys is probably going to die. Just thought you might care to know, seems how I guess you didn't hear me out there when we could have actually saved him."

Jeff bristled. Not only was Cric a good friend that he knew never took such matters lightly, but he knew from experience it was no small matter having to make tough calls – many of them literally having life or death consequences. Jeff reached out and grabbed Cliff by the shoulder, just as it seemed Cliff was getting ready to strike the unresponsive Cric. "Hey!" he shouted. "What the hell?"

Cliff merely shrugged off Jeff's grip and stalked off, still obviously quite angry.

Jeff turned his attention back to Cric, who remained quiet and on the surface, unaffected. "Hey, he's just upset. For what it's worth, I would have done the same thing."

Cric was quiet a long moment before slowly turning to face Jeff. Jeff gulped, unable to remember his friend ever looking as tired, haggard and beat as he did in that moment. "If he dies..." Cric trailed off and shook his head as if trying to perish the thought from his mind.

Jeff placed his hands on Cric's shoulders in an effort to get him to look at him. "Listen, before we left that command ship, Hutch said he wanted to help you – that he wanted to stay and form Voltron, not come back here. I swear to you that he did. When he comes out of this, he'll tell you so himself," Jeff added reassuringly.

Cric broke away and shook his head once more. His voice broke and faltered as he spoke. "You know what? You can have this job back. I don't want it."

“You can’t let Cliff get to you. You’re doing fine,” Jeff countered.

“Fine?” Cric nearly shouted, his voice rising. “This is not fine.” The others loitering in the hall were drawn to the commotion. They watched and whispered to one another as the two team leaders hashed it out.

“You’re not the first guy to second guess a command after the fact,” Jeff insisted. “My last decision sparked the annihilation of an entire planet – try having that on your conscience.”

Before they could continue, Hawkins emerged from the sick bay. Jeff turned, trying to read the expression on his face but came up with nothing given the Commander always seemed to carry himself with such a grave seriousness. It seemed forever that he and his teammates sat rapt with anticipation.

“You can come in and see them now,” he finally began. “But Hutch – though they got him breathing and stabilized – is still unconscious and we’ll be heading back to the base where he can get more intensive care. Don’t get your hopes up,” he added cryptically.

Jeff glanced back at Cric, who looked positively crushed by the remark. “Come on,” Jeff urged him gently.

Cric didn’t have time to protest, for Hawkins approached desiring private council with him. Jeff hoped the Commander wouldn’t be too hard on Cric and reluctantly left them to join his friends in visiting the injured.

On one side of the room lain Hutch, hooked to machines that did his breathing. Jeff was struck by how pale he was – like a ghost. Marvin, his best friend on the force, along with the girls gravitated toward Hutch.

Jeff smiled when he overheard Ginger as she took Hutch’s hand and gave it a good squeeze. “You big jerk. You better wake up.”

“Yeah,” Marvin added, joining in on the effort to try to keep things light and hopeful. “You still owe me money from that card game the other night. I did not cheat!”

Hutch lay eerily still and unresponsive.

Jeff turned his attention to Lisa, who lain in another bed nearby. She simply appeared to be sleeping peacefully, an assortment of medicated fluids being fed to her intravenously. The visible parts of her body above the sheets – her arms – held the evidence of the beating she took. Her helmet must have spared her head from the worst of it – only minor bruising and abrasions were visible there.

Debbie, the lab tech and sometime nurse, must have noticed Jeff’s pained expression. “She’ll be fine,” Debbie reassured him softly. “Whatever that robeast flung at her passed completely through, and missed any vital organs. And it didn’t seem poisonous. She’s quite lucky.”

Jeff nodded slowly. But it pained him more than he was prepared for to see her that way. Truly, he should be far more concerned for the more gravely injured Hutch. But then, it wasn't him Jeff had a soft spot for, either. He wished he could have been there when she was first brought in, to reassure her. It was tempting to make the gesture now, but he perhaps thought it best to let her rest.

It was then that Professor Page entered the sick bay, and Jeff remembered he'd wanted to have a talk with him. He had that device they pulled off Ginger's ship for Page to analyze.

"Whaddaya make of this?" Jeff asked without formal greeting, presenting the small, black electronic device to the Professor.

Page plucked the item from Jeff and scanned it curiously. "Doesn't look like anything the Drules came up with. Where did it come from? Their ship?"

"Wrong," Jeff replied. "From Ginger's." Jeff was about to explain more when it occurred to him that Page could be in league with their spy – or even **be** the spy. At this point, there was no such thing as being too paranoid. With that thought, he quickly snatched the item back from Page and, muttering some unintelligible excuse, brushed past him and out the door, leaving Professor Page baffled.

There was only one person Jeff could really trust outside his own team. And that was Hawkins. As Jeff stalked down the hall to search him out, he knew they'd gotten rid of one problem – Keira. Now it was time to get to the root of their larger problem – the spy. And Jeff wouldn't stop until he or she was found out, if he had to do all the sleuthing himself.

Nerok should be annoyed he lost another robeast and another battle – and that the Alliance had recovered their ship. Indeed, his crew assumed the same as they walked on eggshells while going about their post-battle tasks.

But he wasn't.

They'd caused a lot of damage this time - physical damage to Voltron's components, his pilots and even gained some of his secrets. His spy had already reported two pilots had serious injuries and that one would likely not recover. Nerok's mind swirled with delicious ways to exploit it all. And his first step was to order the spy to ensure that pilot didn't live. He knew the Alliance was foolish enough not to keep trained back-up pilots for Voltron on hand, so paranoid were they to trust people with the workings of such a weapon as Voltron. It would hopefully be their undoing. For once he regrouped and dropped off his injured for fresh troops, they were in for the battle of their lives.

There would be no mercy.

TO BE CONTINUED...