

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

Nothing felt right. Sandu felt it in his bones. He winced as he scolded himself for ever speaking to that alien woman. What had come over him, he wasn't quite sure. Maybe he was just sick of it all – the blackmail, the worry, the coercion of being a pawn in a war he no longer had his heart in. Or perhaps he knew deep in his soul that Nerok and his lot would never keep their word, anyway. He hadn't spoken to or seen his family in some time so for all he knew, they'd been driven to their deaths in the seedy metal fab factories where many civilians were forced to work on the machines of war. Even so, a knot formed in his stomach when their fleet made an abrupt change of plans and direction. He knew better than to spill his guts just for the simple fact that the higher-ups were so paranoid, nothing generally went on that at the very least electronic eyes and ears didn't reveal. Nerok, he thought, must know he told that girl everything. And part of him felt guilty for his carelessness not only likely doomed him, but the girl as well. After all, what use was she going to be to Nerok anyway? Given what he knew of the corrupt in the Drule Empire, the girl didn't stand much of a chance for freedom anyway. But still – it was hard to accept his role in perhaps rushing that cruel fate to a crescendo.

He stood at his post in an otherwise empty corridor and gazed forlornly at a few lonesome and distant asteroids that rolled lazily by out the window. Sandu was so lost in thought he didn't hear a trio of his comrades approach until they were almost at his side. Their expressions were firm, and their firearms aimed at him menacingly. *This is it*, he thought with hopelessness, all the while he made no attempt to either run or speak in his defense. Neither would do him a bit of good. One soldier reached over and relieved Sandu of his own pistol.

The three soldiers didn't speak – they didn't have to. They simply jerked their weapons in the direction he was to walk, and Sandu silently complied. They turned left when they reached the window at the end of the corridor and waiting there were three more armed guards who surrounded a very alarmed looking Keira. Sandu really hated being right so often about the wrong things, and he flinched at the sight of her while avoiding eye contact. The only thing he had left to wonder about is why they weren't simply being gunned down where they stood.

Laser fire lit up the bridge where Twila commanded her fleet. Her eyes blazed to rival that display, unbelieving as she was that Nerok left her in the lurch. What was that fat idiot thinking? Now was their chance, with the Alliance crippled and ailing and most of all – no chance for Voltron! She might have been able to do it alone, but the robeast she'd brought along had some last-minute malfunctions rendering the thing little more than a useless pile of circuits. Fleet against fleet, they were still matched too evenly. Nerok's forces, however, could have given them the edge they needed.

“Damn, damn, damn!” she cursed, her eyes scanning the battle laid out before her on the telescreen. “Get me Nerok on the ultrawave – NOW!” she screamed down at the underlings manning the bridge’s controls.

Within moments, Nerok’s smug face flickered onto the wide screen before her. “Where the hell are you?” she demanded of him, without courtesy or introduction.

Nerok blinked as if lost by her query; though it was obvious to her it was part of the mocking sarcasm she’d known him for.

“Oh, were you expecting me?” he asked in an innocent tone.

“Don’t play games with me, fat ass,” she growled, in no mood for games.

Nerok rolled his eyes. “My dear, we can’t all be blessed with looks like yourself. Fortunately for me, I do have my share of brains. If you had yours, perhaps you wouldn’t have stormed into battle without me against our plans!” His façade was dropped and now his eyes too, were blazing. “Good luck, Twila. You’re going to need it. I’ve made alternate plans.”

He dropped the communication, ensuring himself the last word, which only infuriated Twila more.

“Bastard!” she railed at the now darkened screen.

She took a moment to fantasize about wrapping her hands around his neck and squeezing with all her might until he couldn’t draw another breath. She groaned as more of her fleet blew up before her, bringing her harshly out of the fantasy. It was no use. She’d have to call a retreat.

“Captain Twila?” prodded one nervous soldier who awaited her orders.

“Retreat,” she choked out, despising ever having to form the word with her mouth. “Order a retreat.”

And that’s just what she did, as well – right to her officer’s quarters to brood the whole way home. She’d make Nerok pay for that double cross. He cost the Empire their most coveted victory! For all his gloating about brains, she didn’t see the wisdom behind what he’d done at all. So, she fired a few shots first? Why was it that the damn men in the Empire always thought the women were out to undermine them? It was enough to make her want to scream. It wasn’t fair and somehow, she’d make sure the Supreme Council saw things her way.

As Lisa came to, the first thing she was acutely aware of was a throbbing ache in her head. She groaned softly as she awoke. Then, she realized she was back in sickbay when her eyes were able to focus in on her surroundings.

She tried to sit bolt upright in bed when memories of what happened to her – and Hutch – flooded her woozy head. She soon regretted the move when her wounds protested painfully and fell back flat onto the pillow. She settled for turning her head toward where Hutch was lying before, and her heart sank to see the bed empty.

Lisa clenched her eyes shut against the sight of the empty bed, afraid of what it could mean. By the gods, had that horrible man succeeded in ending Hutch's life? Tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks for entertaining the thought.

She nearly choked on the lump in her throat when someone spoke her name. It was Debbie, the assistant nurse, standing over her and looking rather concerned. "Lisa, how are you feeling?" she asked softly.

"Okay, but..." Lisa paused, blinking back tears. "Hutch. What happened to him? I saw a man standing over him before...before-"

"Relax," Debbie urged while patting one of Lisa's shoulders. "He was moved. But he pulled through. He's still critical," she quickly corrected herself, "and unconscious, but he's still with us. Question is, what were you doing up wandering the halls? You know you're in no shape to launch with your team."

Lisa shook her head. "It wasn't that." The mention of her team made her realize for the first time that there was no tell-tale turbulence of battle, so Lisa felt another wave of relief knowing that meant whatever fight had erupted was over now. "I was following the man who'd done something to Hutch – I saw him inject something into Hutch's IV right before his monitors went crazy. But he found me first, threatened me, and knocked me down." She knew now how crazy she was to follow such a dangerous man in her condition. She was lucky she hadn't managed to get herself killed.

Debbie's eyes grew wide. "Did you get a good look at him? Do you know who it is, Lisa?"

"I'm sorry, he wore a mask," she explained with regret. "But his voice, it was so familiar..." she trailed off, thinking hard as her aching mind would allow, but the light of recognition wouldn't quite illuminate.

Debbie nodded and patted Lisa's hand in a comforting manner. "Don't worry yourself too much about it now. You need to get well. Your team will be by soon to see you – they've been very worried about you. For now, I've got to go let Hutch's doctors know his fluids were tampered with, rather than wait for the labs to tell us. Thank you."

Lisa was glad to see her teammates file in after Debbie left for with such a man lurking on board; she didn't exactly want to meet up with him alone again.

"Are you a sight for sore eyes," she greeted, her arms reaching out toward them.

She scanned their concerned faces – Cric, Shannon, Tangor, Zandee – and fought back new tears at the joy of seeing them again. She was grateful – grateful they had survived and herself as well. They looked worn and tired from battle stress, but they were here.

“Look at you,” Shannon spoke. “Emotional as ever. I think she’ll be alright boys.”

With that, the Sea Team allowed themselves a moment to laugh amid the chaos of recent days.

Shortly afterward, Jeff also joined them, and Lisa was glad to see him. As if on cue, her team fell back and gave the two of them time alone. At first, Jeff seemed awkward and uneasy around her, and Lisa couldn’t figure as to why. It wasn’t like Jeff to actually be shy. But then she recalled the gala and how Jeff had stolen a kiss from her, along with her reaction. In all that had been going on, they hadn’t had time to sort their feeling out, all the while rumors were flying around the ship about them.

If her head didn’t already hurt, she’d give herself a good slap on the forehead. Obviously, he cared for her and what she’d done would seem to him like such a rejection. She reached out for his hand, touched by his concern and smiled up at him reassuringly. He took her hand and almost seemed to blush.

“Oh, Jeff...” There was so much she wanted to tell him. For starters, it wasn’t that she didn’t have feelings for him. However, their situation as teammates on the Voltron Force was another matter. A stellar romance could easily get complicated even without factoring in the fraternizing part, which would easily endanger his career as a pilot. It wasn’t something she was so sure she would want to be responsible for if she allowed herself to follow her heart. Not to mention there was Ginger to consider, and Lisa couldn’t very well flaunt an affair in front of her friend, not knowing how she also felt about Jeff. It was already complicated, before it even began!

“Hey,” he replied, shifting his weight nervously from one foot to the other as he stood by her bed and glanced back at the where the Sea Team waited on the other side of the room. Their glances caused Jeff to quickly take his hand away from Lisa and rub the back of his head self-consciously. “Is it that obvious? I mean, to them?” he asked Lisa in hushed tones.

Lisa tried not to laugh, for it would hurt too much. “I guess so. But you know, they’ve got Cric. He’s intuitive anyway.”

Before she could add anything more, Jeff nodded knowingly and said, “Well, I just wanted to say I’m glad you’re okay.” He then fixed his dark eyes on hers and the fury that flashed within them frightened Lisa, as he continued. “And I’m gonna find this creep, and when I do, he’s going to wish he never crossed the Alliance.”

“Oh, please don’t do anything rash,” she begged of him. “He’s not worth a court martial.”

Jeff just scowled and got more agitated. “I’m getting tired of all these rules that we gotta follow, but nobody else has to.”

Before she had a chance to admonish him, he reached out and squeezed her hand, and with the Sea Team looking on, leaned over and brushed her hair away from her forehead with his free hand so he could plant a quick kiss there.

Ignoring the murmurs from across the room, he turned to leave. “Don’t worry,” he assured her. “He’ll never hurt you again.”

It was no use, she realized as she watched Jeff leave. Once he got something in his head, Jeff rarely let it go. She felt anything but assured, worried about what a confrontation with the traitor might mean for Jeff in more ways than one. At best he’d lose his head, do something rash, and face court martial. At worse, he’d be on the deadly losing end of a heated confrontation, and neither outcome was anything Lisa wanted to consider.

Hazar finally got his chance at solitude after his sister, Dorma, left – he assumed to return to Drule given it was clear they had different ideas about how to save their people. Here on Dreska he’d have all the time alone he wanted. And perhaps it was too much, for he couldn’t stop thinking back to his glory days as the top commander of all the Drule forces. Those days when there was no stopping to weigh right or wrong because it all felt right, no second guessing...nothing but days full of victory, glory and no cares. And now he wondered if he’d brought it all on himself, these dark days of disgrace. Or was Dorma right and he just didn’t have the spine to do what was really right when it counted? He just didn’t know.

Maybe the Council was right all along. If the Alliance were out of the way, there would be no wasting time. They could get to what mattered most – saving his people from a dying world. Hazar shook his head and turned away from the window and the barren landscape it framed outside. But then, who could guarantee the Emperor and high council even care enough about the people to move on what needs to be done? Maybe Dorma was right, in that those Drule leaders were like a tumor that needed to be removed no matter how the Alliance factored into the struggle.

He groaned, frustrated for being so uncertain. Angrier, even, for getting to this place where he no longer felt strong or sure of his actions. Dorma was wrong about one thing – he wasn’t capable of leading anyone in this state. A leader has to have a goal and a focus in addition to being sure of himself, and right now he didn’t have it in him to lead even if he could somehow get out of exile and back to Drule. The hopelessness weighed on his heart, and Hazar felt there was nothing left to do but sit back and watch the fools that ran his planet play their deadly games.

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted as a guard let himself into the room. “Sir.”

“Yes?” Hazar’s voice showed more than a hint of impatience. To his dismay, the guard didn’t seem intimidated at all. It was slowly sinking in that Hazar no longer commanded the respect he once had. Of course, he knew he lost sway with the Council long ago, but now even the lowest

underling seemed unimpressed. He may be exiled but he was still an officer, so the lack of respect was an outrage to him.

This was his fate then, to wander this desolate moon for the rest of his days, of no regard and of no importance. And then Hazar realized why they'd "spared" him the usual fate of a traitor – death would be too easy when assigning him to such a living hell was so much more fun for those sadistic fools to carry out.

"I thought you might want to know," the guard informed him. "Twila was turned away by the Alliance. Nerok's status is not known – he cannot be reached."

"Oh?" Hazar was intrigued. Another failure. Very interesting, indeed.

"She's requested back-up from the small fleet the council left for you to command."

Hazar knew as well as the guard did that the fleet was left as a sort of mockery – a nice reminder of who he used to be and of what he used to be capable. So, if Twila needed the mockery of a fleet upon her retreat, it was just as well. Though it surprised him at this point they even bothered to get his permission to utilize it.

"Fine," Hazar replied, waving the man off so that he may once again be alone with his thoughts.

Nerok's fleet floated in planet Phynos's atmosphere, facing a pair of similar Drule vessels. Keira stood frozen beside Sandu inside the front bay of Nerok's command ship, a robeast towering above them, and the two lone ships visible to her within a nearby screen Nerok stood beside.

"Now, I'll ask you again. Get in the robeast. Both of you." Nerok's body language told her he meant business, and Keira looked to Sandu for any sort of support. But the young Drule soldier looked tired and broken as if resigned to this horrible fate. She knew as well as he did that if they boarded that awful thing, they faced great peril. But maybe they could take it and flee? She didn't know how to operate the thing, and would need his help, but he didn't seem to care.

Keira glanced over at Nerok, who eyed her expectedly.

"I can't believe I ever helped you," she blurted. "I don't care what you do to me now, anyway."

"I thought you might play all self-sacrificing and noble," Nerok replied dryly. "The two ships out there?" Nerok said, pointing to the screen. "They're not manned by Drules – but some of your surviving countrymen. Who, by the way, trust me implicitly, my dear. I asked them to come here and like dutiful little peons they complied."

Keira's jaw went slack and her eyes wide. He couldn't. He **wouldn't**!

“You do what I say when I say it. Or I won’t think twice to shoot those vessels down,” he continued, a smug grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “They won’t even know what hit them.”

Keira shook her head. “No! Even you couldn’t be that cruel.” She looked desperately to Sandu, but the man’s expression had hardly changed. If anything, he seemed annoyed that she was dragging out the inevitable.

“Oh? Who destroyed your little world? Who has been sabotaging the survivors and shooting down their ships so the Alliance can take more of the blame?” He paused, smiling sinisterly at Keira, which made her flesh crawl. “Give up? Me!”

With wild abandon, Keira rushed toward Nerok for he’d enraged her so. Not that she could really harm the imposing Drule, but it mattered little anyway when armed guards halted her charge. It all seemed to amuse Nerok even more. His mocking laughter made her cry out in frustration and anger.

After she calmed down a bit, she realized Nerok was the type that would probably murder them anyway. So, why should she help him do any more harm to the Alliance? Her resolve became all the more firm. “No,” she intoned defiantly. “I believe you’ll kill them anyway. I’m not getting in that thing.”

Nerok shrugged. “You’re right. I probably will shoot them down anyway, just for sport. But it’s up to you, sweetheart, whether you want to witness me hunting down every last of your kind or if you’d rather die first and be spared the sight.”

A cold chill set over her, and she had an awful insight into her situation. Perhaps doing as she was told for now was the best way. If she could just somehow survive – if the Alliance would spare her, she could warn her people. She could get some help.

Tears sprang up in her eyes as she turned and, with Sandu, boarded the intimidating metal behemoth. Once inside, Nerok and several armed soldiers were close behind. Keira got an awful feeling that manifested as a nauseating knot in the pit of her stomach.

Nerok laughed derisively. “Oh, you didn’t think we were going to let you two traitors do the piloting? No, soldiers who still want glory for the Empire will do the fighting. You’re just going to be their little insurance policy. That way, if Voltron does fly, he’ll have quite a little moral pickle to consider. Tie them up,” he ordered.

Guards overcame the pair and bound them, leaving them hog tied on the floor behind the three pilots’ seats. Three of those guards settled in for the flight.

Nerok turned before leaving to look upon his captives one last time. “I suggest you pray Voltron is defeated this time or you’ll meet a very unpleasant fate. Although, here’s something to consider – thanks to the information you supplied us with, dear, this robeast is equipped to

exploit Voltron's weaknesses, should he appear. So never say I'm not classy enough to say 'thanks'."

Keira writhed against her restraints to no avail. She hated herself for what she had done. It was all so clear to her now – how kind the Explorer crew had been to her. But she'd been too brainwashed and frightened to see it then. Now...there was no good outcome. If Voltron fell, a great hope would be lost and it would be partly her fault. If he prevails, she and Sandu would perish. And her people – they were still unwittingly at the mercy of a murderous madman. They would never be warned in time.

As they all waited for word to launch, Keira stopped struggling. She simply closed her eyes and wept quietly.

Dorma's shuttle was sinking slowly onto the landing dock, deep under the surface of her dying home world, planet Drule. Though she was disturbed that she could not persuade her brother Hazar to join in the struggles of the URF, the underground force of rebel fighters, she had her business to attend to. Since her encounter with the URF leader, Baki, she understood her role in the fight. She was on the inside, part of the Drule aristocracy that ruled the planet. At first, it was a mark of shame for her as she came to realize where the Council's priorities were, but with her involvement in the rebellion still a secret, she could deliver the information to the rebels and sabotage the corrupt leaders at the same time. It was a risky job, of course. But in revolution there was always risk and there were always a few among those brave enough to fight that were left swinging at the gallows, so to speak. What is treason to one is a brave fight for survival for another, and Dorma understood that Hazar couldn't quite differentiate between the two. Not yet. Though she prayed he would see the light, too. He had access to more than she, not to mention he had a certain way as a leader – a particular way about him that made the people want to listen. His aid in the rebellion would be invaluable. But for now, she had to leave him and come back home to do the grim and dangerous business of espionage.

Once her shuttle landed, she stole away through the dusty streets until she was sure she was likely not being followed to meet with Baki. She ducked into an abandoned building and found the hinged door in the floor, somewhat difficult in the dim light, which led to the URF's secret meeting place. Only Baki was present in the underground chamber when she entered, candlelight casting his shadow in a larger than life form upon the stone walls behind him. The elder man turned and greeted her with a curt nod.

"Dorma, you've returned. Any luck?" he asked, his voice gruff yet soft.

She shook her head regrettably. "No, Hazar wouldn't listen to reason. I'm afraid we'll have to do this without his help."

Baki nodded. "Very well. What of your father?"

Dorma crossed the room until she stood near to him.

“I fear he’s more set in his ways than Hazar,” she began. She believed that her father, Chancellor Mozak, was a good man, but he also had a sense of loyalty and duty akin to Hazar’s and approaching him was more frightening a concept to Dorma. “But,” she quickly added, “I took the liberty of rummaging through his office right before Hazar was sent away. My parents were so busy fretting over Hazar’s fate it was the perfect opportunity. And this is what I found.” She passed a small tube with rolled up documents within it to Baki, who took them out and stepped closer to one of the candles to read them.

Dorma watched Baki’s eyes scan the papers for a moment, wondering what he would think of the information they revealed. Of course, she’d read them over already. And they were scandalous to say the least. What they contained was evidence from the Drule’s top scientists – many of which were now mysteriously missing or dead – that told of the planet’s true state and how long they really had before the whole place crumbled. With them, were the documents of the High Council’s spin doctors, downplaying the danger and giving a much different reason and timeline for the planet’s death throes.

Baki looked up and stared intently for a moment into Dorma’s eyes. When he spoke, it was one simple word that summed it up.

“Incredible.”

Dorma could contain her excitement no longer. “Isn’t it? Imagine the people we can recruit to our cause with this – this proof of what liars lead us, proof of the cover-up that is sure to doom us if we don’t get rid of that infernal council and Emperor once and for all and save ourselves.” The fact that the Council included her own father was something she was aware of and knew she would have to deal with eventually. For now, she concentrated on the task at hand.

Baki smiled. “Spoken like a true rebel. I’m glad my instinct about you was right, my lady,” he added as he reached out and embraced her warmly. Pulling back, he looked down into her tear-rimmed eyes. “No matter how this turns out, always know that you were one of the few brave ones, Dorma. You’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

A small smile crossed her face. She certainly hoped what little she could do to help would somehow make up for years of her own indulgence and corruption. She owed these people, these commoners who only wanted to live, love and survive, everything she had now.

“There’s still much to do,” she reminded him, blinking back her tears to resume her businesslike demeanor. She knew she had to confront her father. Clearly, he knew of this information and had been just sitting on it. And that made him one of their enemies, which brought up a tempest of emotion in her. Dorma dreaded the possibility that her family would never “come around” to see the light and she’d have to fight them as well. The hope was it wouldn’t have to come to that. She would find out soon, but first there was something else that needed her attention.

“Right,” Baki replied, carefully replacing the documents back in the tube. Then he turned, removed a loose stone in the wall and tucked the tube inside the hollow spot behind it for safe keeping, before replacing the stone. “We’ll call a meeting tonight and work on a plan for a coup – with or without Hazar and your father. We’ll also discuss more recruits.”

“About my father,” Dorma added nervously, swallowing hard. “I – I may approach him tonight. We really do need someone with more influence on the inside than me...” She also hoped she could stave off a coup attempt before she had a chance to convince the ones she loved to join her lest they go down with the rest of the high command and council. She was sure that even if her father wouldn’t join them, he’d not sell out his only daughter. It was a risk she was willing to take.

Baki clasped his hands on Dorma’s shoulders. “Do what you think is best. I have faith in you.”

What he didn’t know was she also had plans for Viceroy Throk. No, she wouldn’t dare tell him about the rebellion. But, she did have a plan to get information from him and put him in his place once and for all.

“Sir. Nerok on the ultrawave,” Sparks said, turning to look to Commander Hawkins at his seat on the Explorer’s bridge.

“Patch him through,” came Hawkins’ reply.

Nerok’s visage blipped onto the screen, and Hawkins was immediately put off by the man’s seemingly permanent sneer. Of all the Drule commanders Hawkins had the displeasure of dealing with, Nerok was his least favorite simply because his arrogance was unparalleled.

“Hawkins,” Nerok began without the courtesy of a title. “I believe I’ve got a young lady aboard my vessel that you’d be interested in having back. After all, she did go turncoat on you, and it’s only fair that you have the chance to punish her accordingly.”

Hawkins glared up at Nerok’s form, smelling some sort of trap. It wasn’t usually a concern of the Drule Empire when it came to following intergalactic laws. The man was up to something...but at the same time, he couldn’t let Keira stay with the Drules. Regardless of what she had done while aboard the Explorer, she’d be much safer in the custody of the Alliance.

“Fine,” Hawkins replied. “Send her over in a shuttle then.”

To Hawkins’ surprise, Sparks muted the communication with Nerok to interrupt. “Sir, pardon me for interjecting, but I think you’re falling right into a trap.”

“Thank you, but I know what I’m doing,” Hawkins shot back rather curtly. He wasn’t sure if it was Nerok’s typical smug ways that had him irritable or the whole mess of the last few weeks putting cracks in his composure, but he definitely was in no mood to be second-guessed by his bridge crew.

“Yes, sir,” mumbled Sparks as he opened the line of communication once again.

Nerok was grinning wider than ever. “That was an interesting *glitch* in communications,” he noted with a tone that let Hawkins know he believed it to be anything but a glitch. “Now, we’ll send the girl over to you. But you have to come down here to Phynos and get her.”

Hawkins was familiar with the planet. It’d been one they explored before and was deemed too hostile a desert planet to settle or even set up base operations upon. He could think of nothing about the planet offhand that Nerok could use to his advantage.

“We’ll be there shortly,” Hawkins said with more than a little skepticism.

After communications were cut, he ordered the crew to change course and be on the lookout. A brief look at radar and other intelligence revealed Nerok’s fleet was only of a moderate size and there appeared to be nothing else nearby in the way of backup for him. Phynos would put them at a distance from the battered satellite base of the Alliance, and without enough pilots for Voltron, even a moderate Drule fleet could be big trouble. Hawkins sighed, unable to shake the feeling that there was something more to this trip than simply securing the return of Keira.

Elsewhere in the Explorer, Cric made his way to Hutch’s new room in the critical care infirmary. The teams were working in shifts to run bedside vigils for both Lisa and Hutch to ensure no further attempts were made on their lives. The Voltron Force seemed to be the least suspected as housing the traitor among them, hence the charge of looking after their own.

He settled in on a chair near Hutch’s bedside and couldn’t help but feel saddened to see the man in such obvious bad shape. Hutch’s pale form was deathly still while various tubes and wires stuck out from countless points on his body to monitor his health or deliver life-sustaining air and fluids.

Cric had been briefed earlier on Hutch’s health and it didn’t sound good. The medical staff wondered if indeed Hutch would ever fly with his team again, if he survived at all. Sitting there, Cric tried to get a feel for what was in store for Hutch as far as recovery by tapping into his sixth sense, but it was no use. He was far too taxed and mentally exhausted from the recent fighting and the responsibilities of leading the entire Voltron Force. Long moments passed while Cric gazed at Hutch’s pathetic form, and guilt stabbed at his heart anew.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

The rhythmic whoosh of the ventilator was the only response to Cric's apology.

Once again, Cric tortured himself with the what-ifs, had his decisions in that critical battle when Hutch was so wounded were different. What if he had listened to Cliff and forgot about Voltron long enough to get Hutch help? He once again wished it were him lying there instead of Hutch.

Lost in thought, he startled when Cinda rested her hand gently on his shoulder. He was relieved it was Cinda, but realized he didn't make such an effective bedside sentry, either.

Without a word, she pulled a seat up by his and motioned for him to turn to face her, so that they were seated facing each other. There they sat, with their knees almost touching. She reached over and took both his hands in hers and he realized then what she was doing.

They were from the same world, and though they had no mutual romantic feelings for one another, Cric was always grateful that one of his own kind were with him on this journey. Not only did Cinda have the same curious features – the same pale blue skin, pointed ears, and extra sensory abilities – but, she understood their unique struggle and customs as a people, including their meditation and mind healing rituals. She would always be one of his dearest friends, so strong was their bond and friendship as countrymen, not to mention the bond of being on the Voltron Force.

Most mind clearing exercises could be done alone, but he knew what she was about to do took two of their kind to accomplish. It involved mutual meditation where the stressed party would absorb the other's positive energy to help speed the healing. Cinda risked wearing herself down in the process, but she seemed not to care as she encouraged Cric to concentrate mentally on the flow of energy between them.

Standing outside what formerly were her brother's office quarters, inside the Council's main building, Dorma readied herself for another meeting with Throk. Before entering, she made one last adjustment to her uniform by unzipping it a bit further down. Normally, she loathed the tendency of the males around her to view her as merely a girl at most and a sex object at worst, but with a cad like Throk, the distraction of his small mind would be to her advantage.

She breezed through the doorway, her long hair and cape leaving a flowing trail behind her. Throk looked up from whatever it was he'd been studying on his desk and smiled knowingly at his visitor.

Dorma fought the urge to rage at him as he stood up from his desk and crossed the room toward her, doing her best to keep her expression even and devoid of disgust.

"I knew it wouldn't be long until you left your sniveling brother and came to your senses," Throk stated matter-of-factly while he paced around Dorma, looking her over.

“Fine,” Dorma replied, still fighting to keep her emotions under control by focusing on what she had to do. Her tone remained casual and playful. “You were right. Is that what you want to hear? Seeing him there on Dreska, I realized what a pathetic thing Hazar always was. He’s a fool.”

Throk stopped his pacing when he came around to face her once again. He was standing so close she could smell the reek of wine on his breath. Gazing up into his eyes, she could tell he was well under the influence of drink and couldn’t help but genuinely smile at her luck. Inebriation on his part would definitely work in her favor.

Throk mistook the smile as a cue of an entirely different sort. Cupping her chin in his hand, he leaned in all the closer.

“What else was I right about, love?” he asked huskily.

She saw his gaze drop to the revealing opening in her uniform and realized he meant to seduce her. Instinctively, she gasped and pushed away from him.

At first, she worried that she’d tipped her hand, but to her surprise it seemed to excite him all the more. He pulled her in close, a look of triumph somehow warping his features to make them appear that much more sinister to Dorma. Her body went rigid in the grip of his embrace, but he didn’t seem to notice. With his free hand, he tugged at her gaping uniform. “Always the tease,” he remarked before consuming her lips in a passionate kiss she had no time to dodge.

The taste of him made her want to simply throw up, and it took a moment before she could twist out of the embrace. She wanted badly to wipe dry her lips of the remnants of his wretched kiss, but she refrained. They stood for a moment, breathing heavily and eyeing each other suspiciously.

Then Throk broke into a smile that sent a chill down Dorma’s spine.

“This is good. I actually like it that you resist.”

Dorma’s mind raced as she tried to think of reasons and ways to stall. Sure, she’d wanted to toy with him, to string him along. But she hadn’t counted on his hormones being in such a damn rage and she certainly didn’t plan on taking it as far as sleeping with him willingly. She eyed him coyly.

“No pleasure before business,” she reminded him, hoping to change the subject long enough to get out of this heated situation. But he simply wouldn’t bite.

“Always pleasure first,” he said lustily. Before she knew it, he grabbed her again and violently tore at her uniform, leaving it torn all the way down past her waist and leaving her breasts covered only by a thin, lacy bra. She barely had time to gasp in shock before he tossed her atop his desk and approached her with clear intentions.

Papers scattered, and she lay there on her back in slack-jawed shock for a moment before she came to her senses. This was serious and this had to stop. That much she knew, even in her panicked mind. As Throk climbed menacingly onto the broad, sturdy desktop, Dorma scooted back as best she could on her hands until her fingers touched upon something that felt long and pointed. Just as Throk was about to overtake her, she gripped the object that turned out to be a letter opener, and thrust it with as much force as she could muster just below Throk's chest. It entered just under where the armored part of his uniform protected his upper chest, and she twisted it upward with all her might. The force with which she stabbed him was so great the handle of the letter opener broke off in her hand.

She dropped the handle and sat partly upright, seemingly frozen, as Throk's eyes widened. He let out a shocked cry and clumsily fumbled with his hands at the invasive object before falling off the desk and into a bleeding heap on the floor.

Dorma's blood pounded in her head, and she couldn't help but cry out as he fell. It seemed an eternity before she could bring herself to peer over the edge of the desk. When she did, she saw his motionless form on the floor. Blood turned the scattered white papers beneath him red. Time almost stood still for her while it slowly sank in as to what she'd done.

Her hand flew to her lips to stifle another cry. This certainly hadn't been her plan. The Council would have her head for murdering a ranking officer. Hot tears sprang to her eyes as she realized that she would have to stay out of sight for good and thus her use in the URF just died with him. But there was one more thing she could do. It was after hours and there were few guards in the building. Chances were, they hadn't heard the commotion. Gathering her senses, Dorma busied herself with ransacking Throk's office.

Hours later Jeff stood with the rest of the Voltron Force in the hangar on the Explorer where their ships were docked, waiting with the others on the word to launch. He was plenty aggravated too, but at least Cric seemed in better spirits. In fact, he was in the best mood Jeff had seen him in for some time. And if the man felt something evil was afoot on this latest mission, he didn't show it.

None of that served to reassure Jeff. He may not be as in tune as Cric, but he didn't need a psychic to tell him this was bad news. Nerok of all people was not known for playing it straight, and Jeff certainly didn't care on a personal level whether he ever saw Keira again, regardless of whether or not this meant she'd be brought to justice for what she'd done. Being stuck with the Drules is what he considered punishment enough. He certainly wasn't enthused with the idea of risking his neck to get her back in custody. But as the Drules so often liked to do, they were using Alliance conduct codes and laws to more or less give them no choice but to fly into yet another trap. If a prisoner was offered for return that had been originally in their custody, they had to accept. More than ever, Jeff was tired of being on the side that was playing – and getting burned by – the rules.

Furthermore, he was upset with Lisa for insisting on launching with them. She was really in no shape to go back out there, and it'd just be something more he had to worry about. Against all advice, she waited in the hangar with them, leaning on Ginger for support. She argued that even if the Land Team couldn't get the extra fire power forming the Turbo Terrain Fighter would afford them, her presence would give them two compact units to face the Drules. It was their best chance without Hutch there to form Voltron and Sven still so far out in his journey to lend a hand. She was right, but he didn't have to like it. They all knew they were likely going to get into a hell of a fight before the day was through, despite all appearances to the contrary.

"This is stupid," he muttered, apparently loudly enough for Cliff to hear.

"For once, we agree," quipped the Land Team leader.

And then the orders they were waiting on came over the ship's communication systems – the alert for all ships to launch and meet Nerok's fleet.

One thing that night had worked out in Dorma's favor. She'd known of a way to leave Hazar's old office without having to go back through security. He always had another route to leave, just in case there was ever an attempt on his life as there had been in the day of Brack's failed rebellion. She tried not to think of the consequences of that attempt for Brack and how it may parallel her own for what she'd done to Throk. Clutching a folder full of documents, she dodged through the shadows of the back alleys, wondering if they were already looking for her.

She went back to the URF hideout, where she planned to simply drop off what she found before going into hiding. Baki was still there when she arrived, however, and he was clearly alarmed by her disheveled and panicked appearance.

"By the stars, Dorma, what happened to you? Are you alright?"

She shook her head. "I – I got in over my head. And I'm afraid Throk's dead."

Dorma found herself blurting out the details of her encounter with Throk, up to the bitter end. Baki stood in shocked disbelief.

His ensuing silence worried her, so she began to add on reassurances. "I won't come back here ever again, and I'll never tell them who I was working with. As far as they'll ever know, if and when they catch me, is that I was working alone. I deeply apologize for any jeopardy I've put the rebellion in. But I did get these..."

Dorma passed the oversized envelope to Baki, who took it from her slowly, still stunned from the news. He then saw that her clothes were indeed ripped, and took his cloak off a nearby chair and offered it to her. She accepted with a weak smile of thanks.

“Dorma, don’t go,” he said finally, his eyes warm with concern. “We’ll hide you, here.”

She waved off his offer. “I can’t possibly let you take the risk. If Throk is dead, they won’t rest until I’m caught. And thanks to the guard’s registry pegging me as the last one authorized in his office, I’m going to be the top suspect. The rebellion means too much for the survival of our people to jeopardize it any more than my foolishness already has,” she said firmly. On this, she would not budge. “I have one more person to see tonight...after that, wish me luck.”

With that, she turned and left, leaving Baki to wonder if he’d ever see her again.

Hawkins felt nothing but anger and frustration, his worst fears on this mission unfolding before him. Nerok lured them in, and as predicted, attacked the Voltron Force. They had no choice but to defend themselves, but to his shock, Nerok had succeeded in tricking the Alliance into once again shooting down more Rilons.

Hawkins picked up his headset and gave it a healthy throw across the bridge. “Dammit, Sparks, I thought we were tracking which ships the Rilons were in? How could this happen again?”

His crew stared back at him wide-eyed and none of them seemed to have any answers that could possibly be close to satisfactory. Meanwhile, the battle was only intensifying to the point where even a retreat would be impossible to do and live to tell about it.

Hawkins’ heart sank when he saw a giant robeast released – the biggest one he’d seen yet – and the teams’ vain efforts to ward it off. He knew what he had to do.

“Commander, where are you going?” Sparks shouted after him.

Hawkins turned to face the bridge crew briefly. “Captain Newley is on his way with a support fleet from the base. He’ll be in charge while I’m gone.”

Sparks exchanged shocked glances with his peers. “Gone? But sir, where?”

“I’m going to go out there and help the Voltron Force. They’ll never make it without Voltron.”

With that, he strode purposefully down the hall toward the launch bay, intent on boarding Hutch’s ship and joining the Teams in their fight. It’d been years since he’d flown any sort of vessel such as he was about to, and truthfully, he wasn’t sure he could pilot part of Voltron successfully as specialized as the components were. But, what the Team didn’t know is he had been quite an ace pilot in his day, and he was willing to give it a shot knowing that with Hutch out of commission, he was the best chance of pulling this off. Of course, there was always a risk

of a commanding officer being so vulnerable in a battle. If the Drules found out that he was in the pilot's seat, he may have more problems than just a robeast to deal with. However, Hawkins found the saying about desperate times true more often than not. Sven would just not make it in time for this one. If the Drules could break the rules of prisoner exchange, then Hawkins felt he could break protocol if it meant saving the Teams and his crew.

As the shuttle descended into Hutch's wheeled Land Team vehicle and settled the commander into the pilot's seat, he took a deep breath. If he can just manage to get the ship out and into formation long enough to form Voltron, the rest would be easy. Or so he hoped.

"Here goes nothing."

One minute, Hazar was picking idly at his dinner thinking about where his loyalties should lie, the next minute Keezor was marching into his quarters and announcing he was under arrest.

"What now?" Hazar demanded while armed Drule soldiers surrounded him.

"Playing it coy, eh Hazar?" Keezor replied.

Hazar was in no mood for games. "I'm already in exile up here," he reasoned. "What could I possibly have done?"

Keezor shrugged with indifference. "Perhaps nothing directly, but you sure know how to send your dear sister to do your sabotaging for you."

Hazar blinked, wondering if he'd heard correctly. "What?"

Keezor seemed out of patience himself. "Guards, bring him along. He can save his pathetic denials for the Council on Drule while he's on trial...for being a conspirator in the attempted murder of Viceroy Throk!"

Hazar was aghast. Dorma. By the gods, what had she done?

"Dorma, where is she?" he demanded while being led down the hall to a waiting transport ship.

Keezor, who was leading the group, looked over his shoulder at Hazar suspiciously. "That's what we'd like to know from you. I will say she tried her best but unfortunately for both of you, the horny fool will live to testify against you."

Hazar relaxed a little knowing she hadn't been caught, though his mind boggled at what Keezor referred to. He knew what a Drule interrogation could be like, especially when the higher ups

were whipped into a paranoid frenzy. He prayed she was never found for whatever she'd done, for nobody deserved the cruelty she'd suffer at their hands.

"You'll both swing for this, Hazar. I'll see to it," Keezor added cryptically.

So much for a trial, Hazar thought bitterly. It seemed that whatever had transpired, their idea of who orchestrated it was already decided, and the punishments ready to mete out. Not that a kangaroo court scenario surprised him too much anymore – not after the fiasco that decided his exile. But out of all this confusion and befuddlement one thing became clear in Hazar's mind. He could no longer sit idly by on the sidelines. He had to pick a side and make a stand, or his family and his people were truly doomed.

Just when all seemed hopeless, Cric couldn't believe his eyes. But there it was, clear as day – Hutch's ship blazing a course straight for where the teams and robeast fought above the hot sands on Phynos.

"Do you see what I see?" Cric shouted to his teammates.

Cliff's image blipped onto Cric's telescreen. "I don't know how it's possible, but I see him, too. Not flying too steady either but frankly, I'm surprised he's flying at all."

The puzzlement only deepened when Cric tried to raise Hutch on the communicator, but no matter what frequency he tried, he couldn't see into the cockpit of the ship. Whoever it was in that ship, they wanted to remain anonymous.

However, the robeast wasn't letting up, so Cric figured there was one thing for them to do – break up their sub-units and form Voltron.

He gave the order, but whoever was piloting Hutch's ship didn't fall into formation right and was nearly taken out by the robeast as a result.

As the teams circled back around to give it another shot, Cliff made his frustrations clear, and Jeff only seconded them.

"I don't know who you are, guy, but you better learn how to fly that thing and fast," Cliff informed their mystery helper. "And if that's you, Hutch, not so sure you're helping us, mate."

"Oh man," Jeff chimed in. "Just what we need...newbie training at a time like this."

Cric would have to agree with Jeff. He'd seen Hutch earlier in the day, and there was just no way short of a miracle that was Hutch in there. Though, sadly, a zombie-like Hutch would probably be flying better than that guy was at the moment. Even Sven, he supposed, would be doing better

than this but it'd practically require a time warp for that much to be true. It was entirely academic at this point, however.

"No time for this, team," Cric reminded them as he dodged laser fire seemingly coming from all directions. "We gotta try again and get it right this time. Cliff, hold your guy's hand if you have to – make it count."

"If the damn fool has his communicator on," Cliff muttered, but went ahead and gave the required aid for the tight formation required to form Voltron, along with the special settings needed for the ship to properly engage.

They got the formation right this try, but before any engaging could happen, the robeast and any Drule fighters in the vicinity hit Hutch's ship hard, sending it plummeting out of formation toward the sand below.

Cric thought it odd the vessel was so brutally singled out, but then Nerok couldn't resist the opportunity to gloat and lay the mystery to rest.

He came over all their communications, cheerful and satisfied with himself than ever. "Still no Voltron for you I'm afraid. And really - sending your **commanding** officer out in the field of battle? How pathetically desperate of you."

The teams let loose a collective gasp of shock. Could it really be Hawkins piloting Hutch's vehicle?

"Commander, is that really you?" Cric asked while once again trying to raise him on the screen. Hawkins' face flickered onto Cric's screen as his cover was blown, and by the Explorer spy, no doubt – there was no need to keep from showing himself. He watched helplessly as the Commander tried to gain control of the vessel. "Hold on sir, we'll come get you."

But to everyone's surprise, Hawkins leveled out before he crashed into the desert, slightly worse for wear but still flying. "I've got it, thanks," he called back.

"Right. Ready to try this again?" suggested Cliff, who sounded noticeably less irritated and even a bit sheepish.

"Whenever you are," shot back Hawkins.

"This is historical," Ginger chimed in.

"What, that the commander is flying with us?" Cric asked.

"No, that Jeff is speechless for once."

The humor relieved some tension and prepared the team for another shot at forming Voltron.

This time, the action was a success but oddly the turn of events didn't seem to dim Nerok's good cheer. They soon found out why. Just as they were about to do serious battle with the giant robeast, Nerok once more sent them an unwanted message.

"By the way," he informed them, again overriding their communications. "Never let it be said that I wasn't serious about sending the Rilon back to you. I even threw in the bonus of Sandu, the little buddy you bonded with over tea way back when. They're in the robeast," he continued, showing them all a live shot of the beast's interior chamber where the pilots and two bound prisoners sat. "They're all yours if you can figure out how to get them out before the robeast tears you to shreds. Have a nice day."

The teams seemed stunned into silence until Jeff spoke up. "Great. Now what do we do?"

Before they could come up with any grand schemes, the robeast enveloped Voltron in its enormous, crushing embrace, whirled him around and flung him hard into the desert terrain below. The throw was so forceful, that Voltron sunk considerably into the dune with his head, feet and hands the only visible portions sticking out.

"Whatever we do," Jeff croaked when the dust settled. "Let's not do that again."

"That thing is too powerful to fool around with strength for strength," Hawkins interjected. "I think you know what we have to do."

Cric shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "But sir..."

"Remember what I said about sacrificing the few to save the many?" Hawkins asked. "It's not easy, but in the big picture, letting ourselves be destroyed when it's clear Nerok has no plans to let those prisoners go with their lives doesn't make sense. You've seen what he's done to innocents throughout the galaxy, and he'll continue to do it unless we survive to stop him."

Cric watched the robeast move in closer on his monitor and swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. How many countless and nameless Drule soldiers had he probably killed in this war without a second thought? It was the natural instinct of survival. And yet, those prisoners on that robeast, he'd known them. They had a face and a name to him and that's what made it such a cruel choice to make.

"You're right, sir," he relented, his heart heavy with regret.

Voltron struggled to get out of the heavy sand and right himself, but that was proving a formidable task with the robeast closing in all the while. Voltron wasn't fast enough and the robeast hit them with some sort of laser blast – and yet, the blast seemed to do nothing but bathe them in light.

Cric wasn't going to question his luck, and ordered all the retro jets to full power. That not only melted much of the sand around them, but gave Voltron enough of a lift to be able to fly again.

With noticeable regret, Cric gave the next order. “Form blazing sword.”

The two robots hovered there for a long, agonizing moment, facing off as if daring the other to make the first move. Finally, the robeast advanced and Voltron drew the sword up and swung it down toward the advancing robeast.

“Forgive me,” Cric whispered while he helped execute the unavoidable on the robeasts’ hapless occupants.

Contact was made, and the sword caused a sickening array of mini-explosions and shearing metal as it blazed its deadly path through the center of the beast.

Voltron drew back when the deed was done in an effort to be at a safe distance when the beast exploded. Instead of an exhilarating rush, Cric felt an overwhelming sadness as he watched the robeast explode in a brilliant fireball.

His teammates quietly shared in his grief.

You're taking the fun

Out of everything

Making me run

When I don't want to think

You're taking the fun

Out of everything

I don't want to think at all

There's no other way

There's no other way

All that you can do

Is watch them play

You're taking the fun

Out of everything

You're making it clear

When I don't want to think

There's no other way

There's no other way

All that you can do

Is watch them play

--There's No Other Way, Blur