

Winning Days by Purrsia
Book II: Born of Frustration
Part I

Ginger's finger traced the top of her glass as she stared into its liquid contents absently before letting out a sigh. The mess hall was buzzing with its usual lunchtime activities, but she and the other girls sat in a secluded booth under the veil of a somber mood. The fallout from the clash on Rilo still affected them, but it became apparent that something else was also on Ginger's mind.

"I'm worried about Jeff," Ginger confessed, fixing her blue eyes on Lisa and Cinda, who sat across from her. She had often thought the Commander was too hard on the team leaders sometimes, and Jeff especially, given he was so young, yet given so much responsibility for a man not quite out of his teens. Of course, she would never second-guess Commander Hawkins openly and kept those thoughts to herself. Besides, she had to agree with what Hawkins would likely say – that when innocent lives are at stake you couldn't afford to make emotional or hasty decisions.

Lisa, typically lost in thought as she stared out into the vast cosmos that stretched out beyond the window, snapped from her reverie to regard her friend with equal worry. "I don't know of a man who takes a demotion well." She punctuated the statement with a weak smile, but it wasn't fooling anyone.

Cinda's visage turned thoughtful. "It's only been a few weeks. Maybe he needs more time..."

"He's just been so withdrawn," Ginger pressed. "I've never seen him like this before and it really bothers me." The hint of a knowing smile tugged at Cinda's lips, and it didn't escape Ginger's attention. The wrinkle in Ginger's brow deepened. Was it that obvious to the other girls that Ginger carried a torch for the moody leader of her team? Ginger felt the heat of a blush begin to rise up into her fair cheeks – she really hadn't meant to come across as so desperately obvious. Then again, Cinda was more intuitive than most just by her very alien nature. At least Ginger chose to cling to that thought to stave off her embarrassment.

Not that it would be that horrible if the girls knew, but if word got out certain members of the team would never let it rest; not to mention what Jeff himself might make of it. So, in that regard, Ginger wished to keep any longings she may have to herself especially given she couldn't act on them if she wanted to. After all, the Alliance brass would frown upon a liaison between a ranking officer like Jeff and someone like herself as fraternization and Jeff certainly didn't need any more trouble. And most of all, the fear of rejection coupled with damage to their friendship is perhaps what Ginger feared the most in that regard.

"Are you all right, Ginger," Lisa asked gently. "You got awfully quiet..."

This time Ginger's cheeks flushed a deep red. "I was just thinking, you know," she stammered. "M-maybe we can do something nice to cheer Jeff up."

"He doesn't need cheering up."

The girls turned to see Hutch standing by their table, his arms folded across his chest defensively. "What he needs," continued the outspoken Land Team member, "is to admit he really screwed up and to take his demotion like a man."

Ginger gasped not only from the harshness of Hutch's words but also because at that moment, Jeff lumbered past within earshot of the conversation.

"Oh and I suppose you could do better?" Lisa asked, regarding Hutch with a scowl of indignation.

Ginger, lowering her voice, urged, "Shhhh! He's right there, he'll hear us."

"Let him hear," Hutch announced. Ginger glared at Hutch, positive that he was actually speaking louder so that Jeff *would* hear. "And to answer your question Lisa, yes, I could do better than blasting to bits whatever crossed my path. What kind of leadership is that? No offense to Cric of course, but I wish the Commander had given me a shot at leading the Voltron Force."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "You can be a real jerk sometimes, Hutch."

Hutch shrugged, clearly unapologetic. "Hey, I'm just saying what 99% of us are thinking anyway."

With that, his teammate, Cinda, rose to her feet and left the area, saying nothing but letting her disapproving glare speak volumes. As Lisa followed suit, Hutch looked after them bewildered.

"What?" he asked of their retreating forms. "Point out what I've said that isn't true."

"The 'you can do better' part for starters," Ginger snapped, as she got up and brushed past him.

"How would you know?" Hutch challenged. "Women, you're too emotional to handle the truth," he scoffed as she left him standing there.

Her eyes scanned the room until she spotted Jeff with his back to her, seated a few booths down from where she'd just been.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked upon her approach.

"Suit yourself," Jeff replied, as he casually flipped through a menu without looking up.

Ginger slid into the bench across from him. He continued to study the menu while Ginger tried to read his mood. Finally, she decided to cut to the chase. “I’m sorry if you heard any of that. It’s not what most of us are thinking at all.”

Jeff looked across at Ginger for the first time and for a moment Ginger almost regretted the intrusion. She wasn’t sure if he was going to be angry with her for butting in or not. “Don’t be, what he said was true.”

Ginger was taken aback. “But, Jeff –“

“Well except for the idea that he could do better,” Jeff added with a laugh that perplexed Ginger even further.

Ginger slumped back against the seat and regarded Jeff curiously. “I just can’t figure you out, Jeff. Whenever I think I know how you’re going to react you do something like this.”

They met as children, and then came up through Academy together, so Ginger would like to think she knew the man reasonably well.

“What can I say, I’m a complicated guy. I can go back to moping and brooding if it’ll make ya feel better,” he offered with a crooked smile.

“Don’t be silly.” Leaning in closer, she gazed deeply into Jeff’s dark eyes, looking for any signs that he was putting on airs. She resisted the urge to gather one of his hands that was casually resting atop the menu he’d been looking through into her own. As usual, the man was hard to read and the fact that he seemed to so easily come out of his slump, especially in light of comments by Hutch that would normally send the Jeff she knew into a wounded-pride inspired outburst, made her suspicious of his sincerity. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“You mean do I like being demoted? No. But I decided there’s no sense in dwelling on it any longer. Besides, I still have a team to lead...” He trailed off and gave a shrug before returning to the menu. “And Hutch was right,” he added without looking up to meet her gaze. “I had no business just blasting away like that. I got what I deserved, and I’ve got to stop pouting about it.”

Ginger was still skeptical but decided to let it go – for now. “Hutch was right...there’s three words you don’t hear often around here.”

After Hutch’s stunning display of insensitivity in the cafeteria, Lisa returned to her quarters. The frustration of that moment faded as she gently traced her hand along the pile of gauzy fabric that lay on her vanity. It was the dress their unwilling captive had been found in, and Lisa had taken it upon herself to clean and mend the garment. It was a fine dress, she thought, and hoped Keira would like to have it restored to her. Of course, in the scheme of things, it was a small gesture

but under the circumstances, it was the best thing Lisa could think of to offer the young woman short of personally finding and returning her to her own people. The girl had been heartsick and homesick, the staff getting little information out of her other than her name – not that Lisa could blame her.

Lisa picked the dress up and clutched it to her, deciding that this was as good a time as any to seek Keira out and return it to her. One of the ship's lounge rooms had been made into a makeshift quarters for their unexpected guest, and Lisa set out hoping to find Keira there. She was not disappointed.

Walking into the room, she spotted the girl sitting on a bench near a row of windows that stretched from floor to ceiling. Keira's back was to Lisa, and from behind, her long, dark hair made it easy for someone to be mistake Keira for Lisa herself.

Lisa approached tentatively. Once near, she extended the dress out toward Keira and said, "I mended your dress for you. Here, I thought you might like it back."

When Keira simply kept her gaze on the stars, Lisa sat down beside her with the garment laid between them. "It's a lovely dress; very well made," Lisa offered in a vain attempt to make small talk.

After an awkward moment of silence, Lisa tried one more time. "I've got some good news – we think we may have located one of the ships survivors from your world may be on." Lisa was pleased to get a reaction, although it was hard for her to tell if Keira was frightened or just stunned, for the girl simply fixed a wide-eyed gaze on her. "When we get closer, we'll try to make contact."

Though she made a little progress, it was clear to Lisa this was going to be a one-sided conversation. With that, she stood and offered Keira a warm and somewhat apologetic smile before parting ways.

Keira's eyes followed Lisa's retreating form, a scowl marring her features as soon as the door slid closed behind Lisa. Lately, Keira had grown from shocked sorrow at the loss of her world to an increasing unease about what her fate would be at the hands of these people and what their true intentions were. Yes, like the woman who had just been there, the crew of the Explorer had so far treated her well and extended pleasantries and apologies to her. But the seer's words and the horrific memory of her world's last day weighed heavily on Keira not to mention the cryptic warnings of the friendly Drules – a people she'd overheard the crew of the ship refer to as an enemy. Something nagged at Keira's conscious not to trust these people from the Galaxy Alliance, and now that they may be tracking what remained of her people, Keira felt alarmed – even a touch angry. Why, after causing so much destruction on Rilo, would these people devote so much energy to tracking survivors unless they meant to either finish the job or make them slaves? Obviously, they had no problem holding her against her will.

Keira felt hopelessly confused as she looked down at the dress, the one she had stolen to live out her last moments in. The truth was, the people on the ship had been kind to her and she didn't know what or who to believe. Was all this kindness a ploy to gain her trust for something more sinister? One thing was clear to her – someone had to be lying to her about who was the enemy and who was the friendly people and right now, the odds were stacked against the Alliance in her eyes as to who was the friend. After all, it wasn't the Drules who'd captured her and now were hunting down the rest of her people. But what could she do to help? There was no way she could see to escape the ship as the technology was way beyond the scope of her knowledge, even if she could manage to find an escape shuttle or the like. She silently kicked herself for not volunteering to be one of those that the Drules trained to fly.

Feeling hopelessly frustrated, Keira slipped out of the room and wandered down the thankfully empty hallway. She wandered aimlessly, changing her course abruptly if she detected anyone coming down the corridor. The ship was overwhelmingly vast, and soon she found herself lost, which only increased her sense of anger and agitation. It looked to her like she'd traveled into a maintenance area of the ship, given the lack of staff about, the dimly lit passages, and rows of what looked to be simply storage closets.

Tired and at her wits end, Keira leaned against the cool steel wall and began to softly weep until a voice spoke to her from within the shadows.

“Don't be afraid,” the figure spoke in a haggard whisper. “I can help you.”

Shocked, Keira gasped and squinted into the shadows to try to make out who was there, but it was no use – he remained cloaked in shadow. “Who are you?” she demanded while taking a step back.

“I'm with the Drules. I'm a spy they placed on this ship as a measure to try to help them stay ahead of these world-conquering thugs – but my identity must remain a secret. Do you understand?”

Keira slowly nodded, deciding to hear the man out. “But why help me?”

The spy's voice dripped with sympathy. “True, helping you does endanger my own mission but...I saw what they did to your world and because of similar things I'd seen in the past I know what they'll probably do with you...”

Keira gasped. The kindnesses...they were just a front to get her off-guard! Once they get her where they want her, Keira could bet their demeanor would change.

“I – I couldn't just stand by and let them do this to you or what's left of your people.”

Keira didn't know if she wanted to burst into tears or let out a cry of rage.

“I'll help you escape so you can warn your people,” he continued reassuringly.

“No,” she blurted. “I want to help you first.” Keira simply didn’t want to flee. No, she wanted to take something with her that would hurt the Alliance – some privy documents or sensitive information she could relay for the spy – anything. She was angry and wanted to strike back at her captors. Although she might have changed her mind if she could see the sinister smile that spread across the spy’s lips.

“You’ve a fighting spirit – I like that. It will serve you well if you are serious about helping our cause.”

“I am,” she replied with convincing determination. She had no idea why she trusted this man, but something in her begged her to hear him out.

“Good. I have just the task for you. Listen carefully...”

Hawkins was poring over a pile of paperwork related to the incident on Rilo and was about to reach for his trusty bottle of aspirin when Captain Newley appeared in the doorway of his office quarters. Newley had arrived a little earlier than expected but that could easily have been attributed to a lack of Drule opposition – they’d been suspiciously quiet lately. However, Hawkins was more than a little annoyed nobody had bothered to page him regarding the Captain’s arrival.

Hawkins rose and greeted his old friend with the usual salute – as much military force of habit as a show of genuine respect – and Newley returned the gesture in kind.

“Good to see you again, Commander,” Newley said by way of greeting. “Although I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“You and me both,” Hawkins agreed after gesturing an invitation for Newley to take a seat. “You’d think with all this technology, we wouldn’t be drowning in this much paperwork,” Hawkins joked.

Newley surveyed the Commander’s desk and smiled. “I think they keep the archaic form of record keeping alive just to punish us.”

Hawkins laughed lightly. “I wouldn’t doubt it. Probably the only thing left out of the second Geneva Accords, and leave it to high command to keep the last permissible form of torture alive.”

“Anyway, the Voltron Force leaders should be on their way down and as soon as they arrive, I’ll brief you all.”

No sooner had Newley spoken than Jeff, Cliff and Cric appeared at the door. Once the perfunctory salutes and muttered greetings were out of the way, they joined the two officers in sitting around the table. Newley quickly got down to business.

“The brass back at Galaxy Garrison have reviewed the preliminary reports filed regarding the incident on planet Rilo. They relayed the information to me at the base I was previously stationed and I was asked to relay their findings to you. However, instead of discussing this long distance, I made the trip out here in person,” Newley explained. “Partly for security reasons – you never know what new tricks the Drules have come up with to intercept communications – and partly because I feel I need more information.”

Hawkins nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Before I go any farther, I’ll say this. The Garrison agreed with your decision in regards to Voltron Force Captain Jeffrey Jamison.” All three team captains shifted uncomfortably in their seats at the statement. “The good news is it may not be permanent.”

“Could they tell you anything about the people of Rilo and why they may be working with the Drules?” wondered Hawkins.

“Somewhat, though I need some first-hand information to confirm their findings,” he cautioned. “Based on the information the Voltron teams gathered while there, along with pictures and data taken during fly-bys of the city and while the fighting happened combined with Professor Page’s anthropological study of the native captive’s clothing – the jewelry being the greatest help – they’ve concluded who the Rilons might be. I would like to actually interview the surviving native you have here on the Explorer.”

“She ain’t saying much,” Jeff interjected. “About all we got out of her so far is her name.”

“Not that we can blame her,” Cric added.

“It’s worth a shot,” Newley pointed out. “At any rate, their hunch is that the Rilons are descendants of a band of eastern European gypsy-like people who migrated from Earth some time ago. These particular travelers left before overcrowding was really an issue, and long-distance space travel was a lot more dangerous and experimental – it’s a miracle they made it this far and thrived as well as they did.”

Cliff rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Why would they leave then? Was it political?”

“In a way,” Newley confirmed. “This particular group felt that our home world was getting too far advanced technologically speaking, and felt it was impossible to live the simple, spiritual life they craved. Ironically, they took advantage of the technology they so loathed to escape it.”

It was Jeff’s turn to look perplexed. “How did they get a ship? It’s not like any common person can just rent or buy a starship and go on a space cruise...”

“If the old-world records are right, they broke laws with the goal of going to prison. There, they would get drafted into an early experimental program that took criminals off Earth altogether,” Newley explained.

“Prison overcrowding was an issue long before general population growth was,” Hawkins noted.

“Indeed,” Newley agreed. “But one of these shuttles didn’t reach the space station prison – it was commandeered, the fate of the crew and passengers aboard a mystery. The program was largely abandoned afterward when the UN decided it was cruel and unusual to exile people off their home planet. But it was always a theory that this shuttle debacle is what really sealed the off-site prison experiment’s fate.”

Cric slowly nodded. “So, this girl’s ancestors overtook the crew and found themselves way out here. Living their simple lives until we showed up.”

“That’s the theory. If it’s right, it would be the farthest out we’ve ever found Earth born settlers the Garrison haven’t placed themselves. I was hoping the girl could reveal some folklore or stories passed down through her people that might confirm or deny our thinking.”

“And if you are right,” Hawkins noted, “it will be harder than we ever thought to convince her or the survivors that we meant them no harm as prejudiced as they may be when it comes to technological advances.”

“Seeing Voltron and that battle had to really freak them out,” Cliff lamented. “And the poor girl definitely isn’t used to the creature comforts we take for granted – she acts as if the automated sliding doors in this ship are going to consume her.”

Cric nodded in agreement. “I think anyone you would ask will tell you she appears to be very overwhelmed and withdrawn. So good luck with your interview.”

“I sympathize with that, but if we can understand who these people are and where they came from, the better chance we have of making things right,” Newley explained. “Hopefully, Professor Page drew some blood or something when she first arrived – if so, I may not need her to say a thing...her DNA will tell the story for her.”

Suddenly, the lights above them dimmed and turbulence rocked the ship. The men looked about in alarm, one thought striking their minds simultaneously – a Drule attack.

Keira had finally made her way back to her quarters and shucked the alien clothes she’d been issued by her captors in favor of the gown Lisa had returned to her. With any luck, her wearing it would be seen as a concession – a gesture of good will – because if she were really going to help out the spy and hope to escape, she too would have to play the game of faux sincerity. Besides, it

felt good to be in the dress again; although she was annoyed they'd seemingly kept the fine jewels for themselves. True, she'd stolen them in the first place but that wasn't the point in her mind – they still belonged to her people, and the idea that these foreigners just adopted the items for their own insulted Keira to the core. No matter. She was going to have to play it cool. Now she just had to figure out the perfect moment to snoop.

Suddenly, the lights above her flickered and the ship began to quake causing Keira to cry out. She pressed herself against a wall, her mind racing to figure out what was going on. Looking out into space, she could see nothing that could be the cause of such a frightening turn of events. Then, over the loudspeakers, she heard the Voltron Force paged to their ships for battle. Fear tingled down her spine when she realized there was going to be a battle, but at the same time, a spark of motivating hope struck her. Likely, it was the friendly Drules out there – the ones she'd just sworn to help.

“This is my chance,” she muttered while willing herself to creep toward the door. They would all be too consumed with the fighting to pay attention to where she was and what she was up to – or so she hoped.

Before leaving, she grabbed the crumpled garment she'd previously worn and dug a folded piece of paper out of the pocket. It was a map of the Explorer the spy had given her, and he'd told her right where she needed to go...

TO BE CONTINUED