

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

Jeff and his team raced down the hall of the Explorer toward the launching bays, the meeting long forgotten as the ship still rocked from what was no doubt a relentless Drule attack. The other two teams followed close behind, but Jeff led the pack. It wasn't just that the team leader role was hard to break, but his adrenaline was pumping and only one thing was on his mind – fighting back those miserable Drules.

But just as soon as the ruckus begun, it suddenly stopped. It took Jeff a moment to realize the Explorer's alarms stopped blaring and he skidded to a halt. He turned to give the others a questioning glance only to find the same expression greeted him in return.

“What's going on?” Marvin shouted from amid the crowd of eager, if confused, pilots.

At that moment, Hawkins' voice came over the loudspeaker as if to answer Marvin's question. “Cancel launch. There was no attack – just a solar windstorm.”

Cliff broke the ensuing silence with a hearty laugh. “We get all excitable over a little turbulence.”

“Yeah,” Hutch concurred. “We'd have seen the Drules coming before they were on top of us like that. I knew it was nothing all along – I was just following orders,” he quickly added.

As the group dispersed, Jeff barely paid attention to the debate that followed regarding the Drule's sneaky ways and their ever-evolving technology. His heart was still racing, and he just needed a moment to calm down. He was about to catch up with the group when something caught his eye. The alarm console on the wall nearby had a sensor lit – flashing red to be more precise – that he'd rarely seen before. But he knew what it meant.

He hesitated, telling himself he was sure other consoles in the ship and most definitely on the bridge were picking up the signal so the Commander must know of it by now. And still, curiosity drove him deeper into the Explorer until he reached a remote area of the ship - an area few utilized except authorized personnel. He scowled when he observed the few guards about. For what they kept in that area, he'd have thought it'd be more heavily guarded. Even with the disturbance they'd had it shouldn't have shaken a guard worth his salt off his post.

He focused in on the door at the end of the corridor, its keypad lit up green – which Jeff found unsettling. He stood before the door, hesitating once again. Though none of the guards milling about in the area appeared concerned, something nagged at Jeff. Before him was a room full of classified and sensitive documents and the signal and keypad was telling him someone was in there. He knew if he stormed in and an authorized officer was in there, he would be in heaps of

trouble. However, something didn't seem right to Jeff, and after a deep breath, he reached out and punched the release next to the keypad – and the door slid open. Cautiously, he entered the room, letting his eyes adjust to the dimly lit area. The room was filled with rows of filing cabinets, standing tall and rigid in the shadows like solemn sentinels. Nobody from within came forth to confront him, nor could Jeff see anybody as he scanned the room.

After he'd stepped far enough into the room, the door slid shut behind him, which further impeded his vision. Something definitely was amiss – for why would anyone legitimate be lurking around in there with just the reserve lighting on? As he crept along the aisle, his hand rested on the butt of the laser pistol at his side. Sure enough, he spied some movement at the end of the row as he rounded the corner. As he got closer, he could see it was a figure, crouched down and wearing a dark cloak so that they were hard to detect. A drawer on the cabinet they were near was pulled out, and the person was so intent on digging through it, they failed to notice Jeff closing in. No, this was not the behavior of someone who belonged there.

With one hand still on his pistol, Jeff reached out and gripped the snoop by the shoulder. “What are you doing?” he barked.

The spy dropped their files and penlight, and whirled around to gape wide-eyed at their angry accuser.

Jeff recognized those eyes and relaxed his grip on her shoulder in shock. “Keira!”

Deep below the dusty and parched surface of Drule, Nerok sat within the Supreme Council Building, watching as his peers filed in and took their seats. He was already seated, leaning back and wearing a confident smile on his lips. It widened slightly as Hazar entered the room and cast Nerok an ever-subtle glare.

To think, Hazar was a man Nerok once respected. There was a time when Hazar's plotting and efforts against the Alliance was unmatched in cunning and brutality. But in recent months Hazar had, in Nerok's opinion, become soft and he dare say, treasonous. The peace talks Hazar once assured them was merely a clever ruse to keep the Alliance off guard were now becoming a serious thing for the commander of all the Drule forces, and this troubled Nerok deeply. Not only did he not wish to waste time **talking** with the Alliance when they could just be getting rid of the interloping nuisances once and for all, but the Drule people had their pride. It was bad enough their planet was dying – they didn't need to add bowing to the Alliance to their list of embarrassing failures.

Nerok was sure Hazar's crusade was all about to be rendered academic. He already knew Throk and many others on the Supreme Council were growing tired of Hazar's increasing spinelessness, and that his latest accomplishment was sure to convince them to no longer heed Hazar's command. Nerok shifted in his seat with anticipation as Keezor started the meeting.

Hawkins paced in his office, having come there from the bridge after Jeff radioed rather urgently that they needed to meet there. It wasn't long before Jeff charged into the room; practically dragging their unwilling Rilonian guest by the arm, with two lower deck guards following close behind. Of all the things Hawkins imagined, this one hadn't even entered his mind.

"What is the meaning of this, Jeff?" Hawkins demanded, his rugged features marred by an increasing scowl.

"I caught her snooping around classified files, sir." He wasted no time getting to the point.

As soon as the door slid closed behind them, Jeff released his grip on Keira's arm. With the guards standing ominously by the door, she simply stood there between Jeff and Hawkins like a caged rat.

Hawkins had noticed sensors indicating someone in the area, but at the time thought nothing of it for it wasn't unusual for Captain Newley to make a trip to that region of the ship before he returned to his own fleet. When guards in the area hadn't raised an alarm, he assumed he'd been right.

But unlike Jeff, he knew how she'd likely managed to slip past security. In recent battles they'd lost a lot of men and during alerts like the last one, those guarding posts were sometimes called off them to take the place of the missing men in battle. It's a temporary fix that usually got them through until they could get more crew, but it obviously had its disadvantages.

Hawkins rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he studied the young girl. She was adjusting her disheveled cloak, which was little more than a blanket she'd wrapped around herself, while glaring at the floor. Knowing what he did about the girl's people he knew she didn't get access to the room alone – someone with knowledge about the Explorer and possibly some level of security clearance was helping her do their dirty work. But he knew it would also be difficult to get her to talk.

"Commander?" Jeff prompted impatiently, his expression showing his obvious disbelief at Hawkins' lack of reaction so far.

"Take her back to her quarters and guard her," Hawkins told the guards, who promptly complied. Keira put up a brief but futile resistance before being led out of the room. "Search her thoroughly," he reminded the guards as they left.

"Can you believe that?" Jeff asked rhetorically. "We save her, try to find her people and she does something like this. I don't get it."

“I do,” Hawkins replied simply.

“Enlighten me.”

“Think about it from her point of view,” Hawkins began. “To her, we’re just as strange and untrustworthy as the Drules are to us. Our fighting on her world ended it and possibly the lives of everyone she knew. Feelings of gratitude from her are a lot to expect, don’t you think?”

Jeff folded his arms across his chest defensively. “Yeah, but we gotta watch our own backs, too, Commander. I mean she’s getting into things she shouldn’t be anywhere near. She’s putting us all in jeopardy no matter how sorry we feel for her. You gotta see that, Commander.”

“Of course I do, Jeff.”

“Then why did you just – just slap her on the wrist like that?”

Hawkins narrowed his eyes. “Remember who you’re talking to, Jeff.”

Jeff winced, a sign he realized he’d overstepped his bounds – again. In some ways, Hawkins admired the young man’s headstrong ways and spiritedness. They were qualities that sometimes saved their neck in life-or-death situation - situations where uncertainty or hesitation would cost them dearly. However, these were the same attributes that could infuriate him about Jeff, and conversely lead to the kind of carelessness that got Jeff demoted in the first place.

Hawkins sighed. “What would you have us do, Jeff? Interrogate and imprison her with the severity we would deal out to a Drule prisoner of war?”

“That’s my point,” Jeff asserted, his gestures becoming wide and animated to emphasize his words. “She might as well be a Drule spy. I’m willing to guess she’s not looking in classified files for **our** benefit.”

“I understand,” Hawkins replied, his voice showing the strain of his growing impatience with Jeff’s confrontational demeanor. “But I also have sympathy for what the girl has been through. If we treat her as you’re suggesting, we’ll never get her to understand that we’re not the bad guys. Someone on this ship is a spy – I will grant you that – but this someone is playing on that poor girl’s confusion to get their dirty work done. That’s who we need to find and deal with harshly.”

Jeff was still clearly annoyed. “So, in the meantime we let her feed this spy how much damaging information?”

Hawkins stifled a groan. “Again, I ask you, what would you suggest? Onboard lockdown doesn’t seem good enough. So, enlighten **me**.”

“Our next stop is tonight, at the new Sector 3 space station.”

Hawkins nodded. They were due there tonight for a gala ball the high brass there were throwing to celebrate the base's opening. It was the farthest space station they had successfully built away from Garrison headquarters on Earth, not to mention the only one that'd been completed this close to Drule territory, so it was a feat worthy a celebration. And since their fleet – and the Voltron Force – had been integral in helping guard the air space so that the project could see fruition, they'd been invited to the festivities.

“We should leave her there at the base. At least so she can't continue to work with whatever traitor is on board here. And she'd be safer there anyway – at least until we can reunite her with her people. The base is the most fortified we've ever built, and it's not under attack nearly as much as we are.”

Hawkins closed his eyes and grew quiet for a moment. On one hand, they almost needed her around so they could pinpoint the real traitor among them. However, he wasn't sure if using the girl for those means and putting her in that kind of danger was at all humane. In addition, there was always the concern that this cohort of hers might do away with her if he saw she was no longer useful to him, especially if he feared she might be able to give away clues to his or her identity. Perhaps Jeff's idea was a good one.

“I'll consider it,” he relented. “Of course, it depends on Commander Steele's approval to take her on.” Steele had been deployed to helm the new station, so it would surely have to be approved by him ultimately.

Jeff finally relaxed and looked satisfied. “Thank you. Sir,” he added hastily, almost as an afterthought.

“Also, keep this business about Keira and a spy under wraps for now. I may let Cric and Cliff in on the details later, but we don't need word getting around so that our traitor is spooked.”

“Of course, sir.”

“You're dismissed.”

Jeff gave a quick salute before getting on his way.

Little did either of them know, but elsewhere, hidden in the shadows of a deserted part of the Explorer, sat the spy they sought. And he'd heard everything that had just happened thanks to a nearly undetectable bug he'd slipped into Hawkins' office some time ago. Almost getting caught was well worth it now, and he grinned as the “private” conversation poured through the earpiece he had tucked snugly in his ear.

His little accomplice was proving incompetent, but that was okay by him. Her usefulness had almost run its course. While the others were patting themselves on the back at the Gala tonight, that would be his last chance to use the girl to his advantage. That is, if everything went well and she managed to get – and keep – what he'd needed from those files.

After quickly punching in additional text information into the device that recorded what had just taken place in Hawkins' office quarters, the spy forwarded all the information to Nerok. Yes, the Drule was going to want to be in the area if all went as planned tonight.

He'd been sabotaging the Explorer and her crew for some time in often subtle but important ways. Then, when they took that disgruntled yet naïve girl aboard, she provided a perfect disposable foil for his ultimate plot. The fact that one of the Alliance's own was a traitor among them was going to be the least shocking thing compared to what he had planned.

He sat back, sighed, and smiled contently. Honestly, he hadn't ever dreamed he'd go traitor. Nor had he ever dreamed he'd end up **enjoying** twisting the proverbial knife into the Alliance's back so damn much. Really, it was all very much unlike his old self. His old, misguided foolish self. They'd all be so appalled to know it was him, an Earth born and bred loyalist – who came from a long line of proud space sailors – that was doing this to them.

But he had his reasons. Maybe his ancestors were content to work their fingers to the bone and put their lives on the line to get little in the way of promotions, compensation or recognition for their efforts. It was no longer good enough for him. Besides, after being out among the stars, traveling with the crew for so long, he believed he actually saw beyond the stilted bias that fed Alliance propaganda to those back on Earth. That machine that fed such an unjustified sense of pride and righteousness to those poor uninformed fools back home. He could safely say it wasn't just greed driving him now, though Nerok paid him extremely well. No, he truly sympathized with the Drule cause. The Alliance was nothing more than interloping imperialists! Space was insanely vast, he reasoned, so why did they insist on poking around in the Drule's backyard? Politics, stupidity and greed were all it added up to in his mind, and he meant to help put a stop to the insanity. And maybe if the Alliance learned this grievous lesson, they'd stop poking around where they're clearly not wanted or invited and stop sending so many of their own sheep out to slaughter fighting this stupid, pointless war.

He couldn't help it. It's how he felt. And in his own mind, he was doing a far greater good. It's what he told himself, anyway. Sure, this group was going to be sacrificed, but how many young men and women would be saved in the long run if this were put to a stop now? This is what made sense to him and what drove him to these extremes - this deep helplessness, born of his own frustrations.

He wasn't a fool, though. He knew Nerok was a self-serving, backstabbing snake. There was no doubt about that. Ironically, those were the qualities that made him ultimately choose Nerok as his Drule contact. He knew Nerok was one Drule who would not turn him in for any price or consequence. The fat bastard was simply too proud and hell bent on the Alliance's destruction to see or consider anything else. And from what he'd heard about Hazar going soft, he was now glad he hadn't chosen him or he'd likely be ratted out by now.

Yes, it was all coming together beautifully. And with a little more luck, it'd all come crashing down on the Explorer crew tonight with a grand and devastating crescendo.

Tucking his device into his waistband, he rose and headed down the hall smiling and humming a bouncy tune all the way back to his post on the bridge of the Explorer.

Back on Drule, Nerok's satisfaction grew as Hazar struggled to make his case to the council for his hare-brained peace plan. The more Hazar got flustered during the meeting, the more Nerok wanted to laugh in his face. Served the fool right for not listening to him and countless other Drule leaders who knew what was best for their people. What the hell did Hazar think giving in would get them? Under the thumb of the Alliance, that's what!

Hazar clearly struggled to keep his emotions in check as he tried to explain for the last time his reasoning in offering a sincere olive branch to the Alliance. "Gentlemen, please," he pleaded, to which Nerok audibly snorted.

Get out your shovels, gentlemen, Nerok thought to his amusement. *We're going to have a lot of meaningless bullshit to shovel out from under shortly.* He simply flashed a snide grin in Hazar's direction when the Commander briefly showed his annoyance at Nerok's derisive snorting.

"I know you're apprehensive about the Alliance and their intentions in this part of the galaxy. So am I!" Hazar explained, his voice becoming strained and pleading.

Zabar, who was seated beside Nerok, shook his head vehemently. "Then why are you risking the Empire by constantly making concessions to them? It's **embarrassing**."

"Not to mention **treasonous**," Nerok quipped, feeling emboldened by the fact that Hazar, despite having quite an impressive rank, was outnumbered in the arena of popular opinion among those at the table.

"As I've been trying to tell you, if I can stop being interrupted," he added with notable exasperation, "it's because of our overall situation. I believe the time to be focused on conquest, pride and glory is over – or at the very least must be put aside for now. In case you have forgotten, our planet is dying, and if it goes before we find somewhere to move all our people, we will be extinct."

Nerok couldn't help but have a stupid grin on his face as he watched Hazar's eyes burn with desperation, although he mistook it for the kind of desperation that strikes a man that sits on the precipice of losing all his power and influence.

“We need to concentrate on a new world for our people before it’s too late. If that means compromising or working with the Alliance in the meantime so that we can stop wasting time and resources fighting them, then fine. What’s the point of being ‘right’ if we’re all going to end up extinct?” Hazar managed to make his point, finally, in the forceful and, Nerok had to admit, convincing tone that had always made Hazar worthy of a leadership role.

Keezor arched a brow. “Surely, you’ve read the most recent reports from our top scientists. They clearly state we have ample time –“

Hazar rose, his self-control ebbing away by the instant. “Are you blind? Look around you! We live like animals, driven underground and cringing under the force of quakes that grow increasingly violent! Every Drule knows it’s only a matter of time, and frankly, I think we have even **less** time than we think. As for the scientists’ reports, I’ve read them. And all I have to say about that are they know what you want to hear thanks to –“

Nerok could hardly contain his glee, though it was somewhat dashed when Mongo cut Hazar short from accusing the scientists of being bribed and corrupted by Drule politicians, by placing a hand on Hazar’s forearm. Mongo, aside from Hazar’s overly dramatic sister Dorma, was one of Hazar’s only friends left within the Drule hierarchy, and he was lucky he had such a friend present before he shot off his mouth and found his head rolling. Though it was unfortunate for Mongo to be torn between loyalty to Hazar and the Drule command – he was an admirably ruthless warrior in his own right. But then, Nerok thought, nobody told him to cling to a friend who had clearly lost his mind. If he was going to be that weak, Nerok didn’t care if they both went down in a blaze of shame together.

Hazar rested his palms on the council table, leaning his weight onto them and hanging his head as he visibly tried to grapple for control of his thoughts and emotions. Mongo looked physically pained to see his friend struggle so. And Nerok cleared his throat obnoxiously to keep from laughing out loud at the absurdity of it all.

Keezor simply looked unimpressed. “I surely hope you have something besides unproven political conspiracy theories to back up your actions.

Hazar sank slowly into his seat, his eyes remaining closed. He remained silent, signaling defeat.

“Fine then. We’ll let the record show that Hazar has had his moment to be heard,” Keezor continued. “And now we’ll take a final vote to confirm that Viceroy Throk’s recommendation that Hazar be demoted is carried out.”

Not surprisingly, only Mongo declined to cast a yea for the demotion. And so, it was decided in kangaroo court style, that Hazar was ordered in command of a practically useless base near the edge of the Drule’s territory. Of course, because his father was so respected, he was given a perfunctory fleet to “command” but as far as Nerok was concerned, this was the next best thing to actually seeing Hazar jailed for his stupidity.

As the meeting broke up, Nerok was glad to have a beeper-like device he carried go off, because it gave him an excuse not to stick around and watch Dorma go all weepy at the news of her poor brother's fate in what was, more or less, exile. When he read the message from his spy aboard the Explorer, he couldn't help but cackle devilishly. Breaking away from his comrades, he headed for the launching bay and his fleet – he had a date with the Alliance's demise tonight!

Jeff tugged on the front of his jacket absently as he stood with the rest of his teammates waiting to make their entrance into the grand ball that had been set up as a victory celebration. And no doubt, he figured, ripe for the schmoozings of the big brass. He had to admit to himself that he was a little anxious, as this type of function wasn't normally his thing. But the commander insisted this would somehow be relaxing, so he glanced down and checked his formal wear one more time to make sure everything was in order.

As the large elevator descended down through the base, Jeff couldn't help but feel a little claustrophobic; after all, fifteen of them were packed in there which made the area feel anything but spacious. Cliff stood casually leaning against the elevator wall near him, idly watching the floor numbers light one by one as they traveled. He didn't seem bothered one way or the other but then, Jeff considered, Cliff was for the most part pretty laid back. If a few hours of hob-knobbing with Garrison brass were what he had to endure, he just did it like he would anything else.

Cliff must have picked up on Jeff's nerves, for it was then that he cast him a curious glance. "For goodness sake, Jeff, you act like you're going to greet your girlfriend's parents before your first big formal dance." He chuckled, apparently having amused himself with his own analogy.

Jeff shrugged, making his best attempt at being casual. "I just don't care for his kinda stuff. Besides, there are going to be a lot of higher-ups around, and I don't need them breathing down my neck."

"Oh?" Cliff remarked casually. "Concerned about the future of your military career are you?"

"I didn't say that –"

"Heh, if you are, you've gone in the wrong direction with rank lately," came a wisecrack from behind Jeff, from a voice that could belong to no other but Hutch.

Jeff twisted as much as he could in the confined space and glared in the general direction of the offending loudmouth.

Lisa groaned. "Guys, please don't start. The last thing we need is for the lot of you hot heads to come out of this elevator swinging."

A grin spread on Cliff's face. "Imagine that. We're the peacekeepers of the universe, yet we can barely take a two-minute elevator ride together without erupting into a brawl."

"Ha ha. I'm glad you find it all so amusing," Jeff replied with a slight pout as he turned to face the elevator doors again. One of these days, Hutch was going to have an aching jaw thanks to that mouth of his. But Lisa was right. Now wasn't the time to get into it with any of them.

A collective sigh of relief seemed to radiate from the group simultaneously as the elevator glided to a halt and the doors slid open. They stepped out into a breathtaking expanse of a room, with enough gilded gold and sparkling chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceilings to dazzle any diplomat or royal from around the galaxy.

Definitely not my thing, Jeff thought. He also found it slightly unfair that Hawkins stayed behind on the Explorer. He'd have gladly stood watch than to get into this suit that was never going to feel comfortable or natural to him and come here. When the Commander assured Jeff that he deserved to relax and have fun, he almost asked if Hawkins was being funny.

Just then, Hutch sidled up beside Jeff. "Remember, if you want to go all the way to the top, get used to this kind of stuff. That is, if you can get that following orders thing down."

Hutch wisely moved out of the way, quickly striding into the crowd of party-goers, leaving Jeff behind fuming. He stepped aggressively forward as if to pursue Hutch but found himself stopped by Lisa.

She placed her hands over the lapels of his jacket in a gentle gesture to stop his pursuit. "Remember what I said," she gently warned, her dark eyes deep with concern.

Jeff softened and sighed. "I know," he conceded. "I promise I won't deck him. Tonight."

"I know he can be a real jerk," Lisa noted, a bit warily. "But I still hate to see us fight amongst ourselves."

Jeff studied Lisa closely for a moment before offering a comforting smile. Almost from the start of his tour on the Explorer he found Lisa to be intriguing, almost exotic to him. She was quiet, intense with a sincerity that rivaled anyone he knew - and she was from another world. She also had modesty about her own beauty that was refreshing. If Jeff could find himself crushing on one of his teammates, she would be the one. And the way she looked in the satin plum colored gown she wore, gave Jeff pause to take a second look.

Jeff stopped himself from considering the possibilities and simply placed his hands over Lisa's bare, pale shoulders. He met her gaze, her soulful eyes searching his expression with hope that she was getting through to him. "I really promise you, I'll behave. Even if Hutch manages to top himself in the stupid jerk department tonight."

Lisa smiled sweetly. “I appreciate it. Now go have a good time. You know, we could be fighting the Drules instead. Be grateful for a peaceful moment,” she added before breaking away to join the other girls near the bar.

“I’d almost rather be fighting the Drules,” Jeff muttered under his breath once Lisa was out of earshot. He scanned the room, recognizing many of the captains and commanders of the Garrison – and none of which he felt like socializing with. He began looking past all the minglers for a nice corner to hide or at least be inconspicuous in.

He soon spotted a doorway that looked as though it lead to a smaller and unoccupied secondary room. Jeff quickly ducked his way through the crowd, careful not to make eye contact lest he risk being dragged into a boring conversation about the “old days” at the Garrison by some geriatric officer.

He sighed with relief as he cleared the threshold, surprised to see a few of his comrades were already there. Cliff and Marvin stood in the semi-darkness laughing and sipping on drinks. Jeff immediately chastised himself for not stopping at the bar first. At least Hutch was nowhere in sight.

“Hey guys,” he announced by way of greeting.

“I was wondering how long it’d take you to notice this place,” Cliff remarked.

“Well, here I am,” Jeff replied, trying not to eye their drinks with too much envy.

Marvin certainly didn’t seem to notice. His mind was clearly elsewhere. “How about the girls, eh? They clean up nice.”

“As opposed to an ordinary day where they resemble the common filthy street urchin,” Cliff noted with sarcasm.

“You know what I mean,” Marvin insisted. “It’s not everyday you get to see ‘em in dresses like that. Especially that Ginger. Pink is definitely her color.”

Jeff shrugged, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“What do you mean!” Marvin was incredulous. “Are you blind?”

Jeff could feel himself start to blush. “Well, I **noticed** of course, but you know, Ginger and I go way back. She’s like a kid sister to me, you know?”

“Of course,” Cliff said dryly. “But I couldn’t help but see how you were checking Lisa out earlier.”

Jeff’s cheeks felt like they were on fire.

“See that,” Cliff noted, pointing out Jeff’s flaming cheeks to Marvin. “Guilty.”

“Knock it off, you guys,” Jeff insisted, though quite weakly. He started to seriously consider going back out into the party.

It was then that Marvin called attention to a newcomer to their gathering. “Hey, Ginger. Jeff has a crush on Lisa!”

Jeff turned to see Ginger, indeed quite a vision in a strapless pink satin and tulle dress, though she looked paler than normal. She appeared almost stunned to him, but only for a moment. She held two drinks in her hand, extending one out for Jeff to take.

After clearing her throat, she said, “Here. You looked thirsty.”

“You always know what I need,” Jeff replied gratefully, taking the drink. “Never mind Marvin, by the way. We think he’s had too much to drink already. Or maybe too much exposure to Hutch.”

“Or both,” Ginger joked, somewhat weakly.

Cliff merely observed the group dynamics with marked curiosity, but for now, remarked on none of it.

“What, it’s not like isn’t obvious that Jeff was checking her out,” Marvin declared, defending his position. “What’s the big deal? You like her, ask her out already.”

Jeff stared down into his martini glass, very much aware that his blush still raged in his cheeks, and that everyone in the room was staring at him like he was under a microscope. This was certainly awkward. “Shut up, Marvin,” was all he could manage to mutter. It was tempting to deck him. After all, he only told Lisa he wouldn’t hit Hutch, though he doubted she’d buy into such a technicality.

What they needed was a change of subject. But before he could craft a convincing one to break the awkward silence, Lisa joined the group. She seemed to sense something was going on.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asked sheepishly.

“No,” Cliff chimed in, while grabbing Marvin by the arm. “We’re just leaving actually.”

“Hey, you’re spilling my drink,” Marvin cried.

“Let’s go,” Cliff insisted, tugging Marvin’s arm harder and spilling more drink.

Ginger flashed a half-hearted smile. “I’m right behind you guys.” She seemed like she couldn’t get out of the room fast enough.

Lisa watched the others leave and then turned to study Jeff, who was still gazing down into his glass. "I definitely missed something."

Jeff felt Lisa's slender hand brush his face, and he jerked his head up.

"You're blushing!" Lisa noted.

Jeff turned aside and shrugged. "You know how they can be."

"That I do," Lisa agreed. After a moment of silence, she continued. "Listen, you can't spend the whole party hiding in here." She gently touched him on the arm. "Come on," she coaxed.

Jeff turned to regard her. Knowing Marvin's penchant for gossip and the fact that by now word had already gotten to Hutch about everything, he really had nothing to lose. But first, he had to find out if she had a boyfriend or anything back home, but in a subtle way.

"Okay, but let's just stay here and talk for a minute," he began. When Lisa seemed agreeable to it, he forged on. "Anyone you miss from back home?"

"My parents of course," she replied, content to make small talk. "I guess that's it. I haven't really got anybody else. You?"

"Me too."

What happened next Jeff would have liked to blame on the alcohol if not for the fact that he'd only taken a sip so far. Before he had a chance to second guess himself, he leaned in, catching Lisa's delicate chin with his free hand and tilting her face up to meet his. He kissed her lightly at first. But when she seemed to return the gesture, the kiss grew deeper.

It felt like he'd only begun to relish in the embrace when she promptly broke it. "I – I can't," was all she could muster as an explanation before dashing back into the crowd in the adjoining room. She almost seemed guilty for what had transpired.

Jeff stood there, more confused than ever. The whole damn universe was going insane around him. Or so it seemed.

Back on the Explorer, Kiera was restless. She wondered how the man helping her could get to her now that guards stood outside her door. Of course, she'd copied the documents she was directed to into a tiny recorder device he'd given her, and swallowed the encapsulated information. It took her many trial runs and practice to use the recorder right – so strange was all the technology the spy was equipped with. She hoped she got it right when it counted.

The capsule had made her sick, and she had expelled it some time ago. Now she was afraid they'd come in and do a search, find it, and make all her trouble for naught. Keira paced nervously in the converted lounge that was her quarters, watching out the windows at the sprawling structure of steel the Explorer hovered above. It amazed her that men could construct such a massive structure in the emptiness of space and then live within it. It was awesome and frightening to her at the same time. She would prefer to have her feet on solid ground any day.

Keira whirled around as the doors to her chambers slid open, and in marched the guards that were in charge of keeping her out of trouble.

"What do you want?" she choked out, not liking at all the grim look on their faces.

"You're coming with us. We have orders to take you off the Explorer onto the base," explained the one on the right.

Keira twisted to look out the windows again at the looming structure, which magnified her sense of dread. Who knew what they did to prisoners in a place like that. She shook her head, trying to clear images of torture from her head that the spy had told her these people were capable of. "No, wait – I –"

She stopped her protest when she felt a firm grip on her arm. Keira tore her eyes off the base below, determined to stare her captor in the eye. A gasp of shock escaped her lips when she saw that it was not one of the guards who had hold of her, but a man hidden behind a full-face mask. It took her a moment to realize the offending guards lay unconscious at their feet.

Keira was dumbfounded and speechless.

"Don't worry, they are unharmed. I simply knocked them out with a little ether."

As soon as the mystery man spoke she knew it was her friend – her only ally on the ship, and relaxed in her relief.

"The time has come for you to be strong, Keira. You will leave the Explorer tonight, but not to go to the base."

Keira slowly nodded and tried not to think about knots her stomach was in.

"While they are down there at their fancy party, having laughs and a good time, you will make your escape. That is...if you delivered what I asked of you."

Keira felt a surge of anger. To think, that they expected her to believe they were so hard at work to find her people when they made stops such as this to be merry, all the while those they inflicted harm upon are out there somewhere suffering and scared.

He let go of her so she could dash to the large potted plant in the corner, where she had buried the capsule after she'd expelled it. Running back to him, she held it out for him to take, regarding him with a look that showed she was desperate to please him. She felt such a strong bond with the spy – perhaps borne of their mutual mission – and only hoped she'd done well.

As he took the capsule from her, their eyes met and she thought she saw a stroke of pity flash in his dark eyes for a moment. As he hurried to the task of analyzing the capsules tiny device for digital information, Keira waited anxiously and wondered what he was going to have her do next that would garner such a piteous look from him.

TO BE CONTINUED