

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

After she saw Lisa dash out of the room that she'd left moments before, Ginger steeled herself to go back in and talk to Jeff. Ranks and rules aside, her feelings were her feelings and she wasn't about to stifle them any longer. Putting down her drink, she clutched the pink tulle on the skirt of her gown to raise it slightly, and dashed back into the adjacent room.

She found Jeff standing there alone, in the semi-darkness, sipping on the drink she'd given him earlier. Face to face with him, she became flustered and was afraid she was about to lose all courage. Before she could say a word, Jeff regarded her coolly.

"I was hoping you'd come back. I'm sorry about before," he began.

"Y-you are?"

Jeff smiled which gave Ginger an unexpected bout of the butterflies. "Yeah. I just didn't want them to know."

"Know what?" Ginger prodded, unbelieving that he was about to confess what she wanted to hear. She almost couldn't stand how coy he was being – she needed to hear it straight from him.

"You know. How I really feel about you. If we're going to be a couple, we'll have to keep a low profile."

Ginger's heart pounded. So, he did feel the way she did. He didn't regard her in a familial way at all! "Of course," she stammered, still quite stunned by the speed at which all was being revealed. It was like a dream come true.

"Poor Lisa. She took it kind of hard after believing all that stuff Marvin and Cliff were saying, but--" he paused to draw Ginger close to him, setting down his drink and wrapping his arms around her slender waist. "– she's just not the one for me."

As he bent his head down to kiss her, Ginger's heart pounded furiously – partly from the thrill of the moment and partly because they were in major danger of being discovered, which was a thrill all its own. The excitement was almost too much to bear.

He kissed her tenderly, his lips soft and sweet. She closed her eyes and relished the sensation, sighing as he moved from her lips to explore her jaw line. Then he moved on to her neck and on farther, until he was gently kissing the exposed upper portion of her breasts that the strapless gown revealed.

“Oh, Jeff...” she gasped, thrilled as she was with his every touch.

“Ginger?” came a questioning reply, but it did not come from Jeff.

Ginger was shocked. “Marvin!” she shrieked, pushing her Romeo away, appalled to see Marvin’s gangly visage staring back at her.

She blinked, his unmistakable if slightly nasal voice snapping her clean out of her romantic reverie. She still sat on the same bench seat along the wall away from the larger crowd - the spot she’d picked out soon after she’d heard Jeff’s stinging admission. The embrace, the kiss; it was all a fantasy in her head.

Ginger’s cheeks flushed, and she found herself very annoyed at Marvin, who was regarding her with a bemused curiosity. “What do you want?” she snapped.

He grimaced in response to the annoyance in her voice. “You just looked lonely is all. What were you mumbling about Jeff for?”

It was Ginger’s turn to grimace.

It was then that Cliff meandered over and shooed Marvin away. Ginger was relieved for a moment – until Cliff sat down beside her to ask his own set of prying questions.

“You don’t strike me as the wallflower type,” he remarked. “Want to talk about it?”

Ginger sighed. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

Though she kept her eyes fixed on the crowd of mingling socialites in front of her, she could feel Cliff’s gaze on her and wished she could just disappear. “Perhaps we’ve all been cooped up together too long on this mission.”

“Probably,” Ginger offered flatly, avoiding the Land Team leader’s scrutinizing look.

“We’ve grown together like family,” he pressed, “and we even fight like siblings, too.”

Ginger finally turned to look at Cliff. “And I’m everyone’s favorite sister. Is that it?”

Cliff arched a brow. “Tell me, what is it about Jeff that has all you ladies so enthralled? Are the rest of us not reckless enough?”

Ginger turned away and rose to her feet.

“You know,” she heard Cliff warn her before she walked away. “For any of us to get involved with one another would not be tolerated by the higher-ups. Think about that before you go doing something that might not only ruin your friendship with him, but your career with the Alliance as well. You’re too good a pilot to throw it all away.”

With that, Ginger simply walked away fuming, not wanting to hear any more of Cliff's blunt and unsolicited advice. Though what he said was true, she knew. She had told herself the same thing for the longest time and it's what kept her from acting on any of her feelings. Given that, she felt ridiculous for feeling so hurt over what she'd overheard but she couldn't help it. Rules of conduct aside, the feelings were there and they were not governed by reason or rationality. And part of her nagged that if Jeff was such a rule breaker and risk taker, perhaps he would pursue a relationship. But now she feared it would not be with her. Ginger's only hope was that Lisa, who she saw across the room talking with Cric, didn't – or wouldn't – return any feelings Jeff may have.

Keira was glad of one thing. The spy had accompanied her this far. He'd taken her through the docking bay via the maintenance corridor, having had all the security cameras intervals down to a science. There was no way she could have made it on her own, no matter how much he'd instructed her. It was enough of a miracle she'd gotten into the classifieds with him helping her only remotely, but even then she got caught. There was no room for error now.

Why she trusted this stranger whose name she didn't know and face she'd never seen was strange to her. Perhaps it was because he was the only one who seemed to really care about her and her fate. He was the only one who seemed to care how she really felt and about her desire to flee – to not feel so helpless and lost. Her life was in his hands now.

She'd thought they were going to steal away in an escape pod given he'd had her dress in one of the space worthy suits he'd brought to her, but as they came into the launch bay, her eyes widened. There, docked in groups of five in the semi-darkness, were the ships that made up that horrible monster that helped destroy her world. It would appear they weren't after just any ship.

"You're coming with me, right?" she whispered. Surely, he didn't expect –

He shook his head. "No, I'm still needed here. But I've been able to set the codes and frequencies on this," he said, passing her a hand-held electronic gadget, "so that, when you place it underneath the console of any of these ships, you'll need to do nothing else but hold on for the ride. That is, thanks to the information you gathered."

Keira blushed and felt a rush of pride that overshadowed her nerves for a moment. He placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "Be brave, Keira. You are doing a good thing. For yourself. For your people. For everyone in this galaxy. You believe that, don't you?"

Keira nodded. He sounded so sincere, and she gazed up into his eyes – which were the only feature of his face visible behind the mask he wore – with eagerness and admiration shining in her own. She believed in this fight - just the two of them against such impossible odds. She didn't even stop to wonder whether or not this untested plan would even work, or that he could be sending her off in case it literally crashed and burned. No, she needed to believe in this. In him

He then pointed to the red fighter jet, the same one Keira had ridden in – though she barely remembered the ride – when she left Rilo. “You’ll take that one. It’s key in the formation of Voltron being that much of his energy packs are there, as well as the solar receptors and main navigation units for him. Without that one ship, that monster that devastated your world will be no more.”

Keira took a deep breath. She could do this! She could just sit in that ship and make her escape while at the same time, doing some good by helping the Drules. She clasped both hands around the device and brought it to her chest. “Okay,” she said, trying to make her voice reflect how firm and determined she was in her heart, although it betrayed her by breaking.

Taking her by the hand, they ran to the ship, the one Ginger flew. He triggered the manual override for the canopy, and Keira watched in awe as it slid back.

“We don’t have much time before those guards awake and report you’re missing,” the spy gently reminded her. “Are you sure you can do this?”

Keira had never been so afraid in all her life. She swallowed hard. “Yes.”

He helped her climb up into the cockpit and instructed her one last time on where to place the device and how to activate it. “Don’t worry,” he assured her. “They won’t shoot you down. They can’t risk losing this ship. Nerok, my contact with the Drules, will be waiting to receive you not too far away, although he had to keep somewhat of a distance to go undetected. Everything is programmed into the device. All you have to do is just sit there.”

Keira settled uneasily into the pilot’s seat and looked all about the craft. She closed her eyes and nodded.

“I leave you now.”

When she looked up the spy was gone, and the canopy was sliding closed. The disappointment of not being able to thank him crumbled as the reality of what she was about to do overwhelmed her.

Tentatively, she leaned over and reached out, feeling for the spot under the ship’s main console where she needed to place the device. When she did, it clicked in and stuck like a magnet. She paused a moment, then pressed the switch on the device, as she had been told.

The ship almost instantly came to life and the engines fired up. Startled by the events, she sat back sharply in the seat. Ahead of her, she saw the door on the launch bay lift to reveal the starry space ahead.

This is it, she told herself.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when restraints in the seat automatically came out and over her shoulders to hold her in the seat. She shuddered to think what other surprises awaited her.

Suddenly, alarms on the Explorer itself began to blare and to her horror, the launch bay door began to descend. Obviously, those in power were aware that an unauthorized launch was being attempted and they meant to stop it. She feared what they'd do to her if she were caught now more than she feared flying. All Keira could do was clutch at her restraints and pray she would make it – she couldn't turn back now. This was it.

Then, the ship took off and with such a force Keira was pushed back hard into the seat. A small cry escaped her as she narrowly cleared the launch bay door and flew up and out. She had put all her trust – indeed her life – in the belief that a ship and a device she didn't understand would deliver her to freedom. Much like her ancestors had long ago. Keira prayed their luck would be with her.

Right before the alarms sounded, Hawkins had been idly wondering about how things were going at the party below, taking his mind for a moment off who this traitor on board could be. The ensuing cacophony of alarms ended that, and the crew on the bridge of the Explorer with him barely had time to react to his rapid-fire orders. It didn't take long to determine a ship was launching without clearance, and what was worse, the ship in question was part of the Air Team squad. Yet, Hawkins knew all the team members were down below at the base, attending the gala.

He groaned in frustration when they'd failed to stop the thief by closing the bay door. Hawkins had the base alerted to the trouble, and then tried to contact Ginger's ship to no avail. Just then, two dazed men came onto the bridge, and Hawkins' heart sank when he recognized them as the pair assigned to guard Keira. They told him they'd gone to take the girl with them in preparation to escort her to the base. But the next thing they knew, they were waking up in a daze and she was simply gone. Hawkins couldn't believe what he was hearing. Whoever was helping Keira knew what they were doing and was no doubt behind the taking of the fighter plane. It was one of the 15 units they could surely not form Voltron without, and Hawkins had a hunch the traitor knew this, in addition to having access to privy information and a talent with technology.

Was it their traitor flying the ship? And was Keira with him? Willingly?

“You never found anything on the girl when you first put her in the room, right?” Hawkins asked the pair, double-checking to be sure.

“No sir. We searched her and the room. It appeared she took nothing from the records room.”

Hawkins paced, trying to piece together what happened and figure out what to do next. Where were the teams? It seemed like the minutes ticked by agonizingly slow as he waited for the shuttle that carried the Voltron Force back to the Explorer.

They'd hastily dressed in their space-worthy uniforms on the way and had been briefed on the situation. Hawkins watched anxiously as they launched, hoping they could recover Ginger's ship. He had a bad feeling that the ship was headed someplace he dared not fully consider.

As Jeff boarded his ship with Ginger in tow, he was focused on one thing - getting that ship back and beating the snot of the thief. Taking off, he gunned the throttle hard seemingly forgetful of his passenger who had no seat and hence, Ginger had a hard time holding steady inside the cockpit. She said nothing, however, perhaps herself too anxious to get her ship back.

In his passion for the pursuit, Jeff forgot he was not in charge of all the teams any longer and instinctively began barking orders. Cric gently reminded him by popping onto a private channel of their ships' communicators, and Jeff fell silent as the teams heeded Cric's suggestion to form into their five-part combat sub-units. All, that is, except for the Air Team, which had to stay in single formation. He shook off the chain of command gaffe and focused anew on the mission ahead. Just because he wasn't in full command didn't mean he couldn't take initiative.

He began closing the distance between the stolen craft and his own ship, as it became apparent the plane was on some sort of autopilot and thus traveling at a constant speed. However, it was an autopilot that Jeff soon found out he could not interfere with or override. And shockingly, neither could Hawkins from the Explorer.

Perspiration dotted his brow, and his jaw clenched with every combination of scanners and codes that yielded no results. One thing finally did work, however. He was able to link up to the plane's telescreen and get a look at the culprit. It was a fleeting, touch-and-go connection. And although the teams had been briefed on who possibly might be inside, cries of shock came from both he and Ginger. Even within an oversize Alliance uniform and with a helmet on, he recognized that it was Keira, looking pale and petrified. And she was alone. Surprisingly, his anger did not subside at all with this new information. If anything, the knowledge infuriated him more.

What the hell did she think she was doing?

And how did she even manage to do it?

After he relayed the information to his teammates and the command ship, Jeff pushed his ship to the limit to bleed the last bit of speed out of it. Whatever she was up to, she wasn't getting away with it. He would make sure of it.

"Keira!" he shouted into the communicator as her image flickered on and off the screen on his console. "You don't know what you're doing. You're in great danger." He wasn't sure if she could hear him or not, but he wanted desperately to appeal to her sense of self-preservation and reason. She surely did not look comfortable with her situation. He clung to the chance he could

talk her into disabling whatever it was that was controlling the ship. That is, if she knew how. He fought back an increasing feeling of hopelessness.

Noticing another channel on his communicator opening up, he switched expecting to see the Commander or one of his teammates materialize on the screen. He got a shock when Nerok's smug image showed up instead.

"She knows exactly what she's doing, I assure you."

Adrenaline coursed anew through Jeff's veins. The Drules were involved which meant Keira was probably taking the ship to –

"Jeff, look!" Ginger shouted, pointing ahead.

Indeed, looking out past the path of the stolen craft loomed objects coming into view that could only be an entire Drule fleet. At the same time, radar was picking up hundreds of blips heading toward them at a much faster rate. Jeff had no doubt they were Drule fighter ships. They needed reinforcements and hoped squads from the base would be enough without Voltron.

Keira wanted badly to keep her eyes clenched tightly shut but when she did so, the nausea threatened to overtake her. Surely, she was not used to this kind of motion and speed. Her terror intensified as she realized the other ships were following her, although she tried to think of what the spy told her - that the ship she stole was too important to them to shoot down.

She'd heard the man who'd caught her snooping about before urge her to cooperate with him but she was too terrified to move. If she touched anything now and the ship went out of control – oh, but she couldn't bear to think of the consequences. No, she was in too deep now. She planned to stick with the original plan and that was to run. Run to the safety of the Drules.

Keira began to weep openly when she saw the Drule fleet come into view. They'd kept their word! They were going to save her! Fighter planes zipped past her, and she was grateful when they fired on her pursuers, warding them off.

Her heart skipped a beat when she felt the plane power down to a slower speed, panicking for a moment as her mind raced with the thoughts of power failures or any other kind of deadly catastrophe that could go wrong with one of these contraptions. She was gripping her restraints so tightly, her knuckles were likely whiter than the gloves she wore.

Soon she realized why the plane slowed. She was getting ever closer to the main Drule fleet. Keira tried to remain calm as the plane banked, seemingly drawn to a particular ship in the fleet.

"It's almost over," she whispered to herself, her voice nothing but a dry croak inside her parched mouth. "It's almost over."

With the ship at the banked angle, she dared glance behind her to see space was alight with brilliant laser fire where the brave Drules fought to keep her oppressors at bay. She hoped not many of them would be hurt.

Indeed, the plane sought the Drule's command ship and as she neared, she could see a door on its side slowly slide open. As the glow of a tractor beam from the command ship gently guided her in, Keira knew freedom and safety were just moments away.

*All this frustration
I can't meet all my desires
Strange conversation
Self-control has just expired
All an illusion
Only in my head you don't exist
Who are you fooling
Don't need a shrink but an exorcist*

*Show me the movie
Of who you are and where you're from
Born of frustration
Caught up in the webs you've spun
Where's the confusion
A vision of what life is like
Show me the movie
That doesn't deal in black and white*

*Stop stop talking about who's to blame
When all that counts is how to change*

*I'm living in the weirdest dream
Where nothing is the way it seems
Where no one's who they need to be
Where nothing seems that real to me
What can we build our lives upon
No wall of stone, no solid ground
The world is spinning endlessly
We're clinging to our own beliefs*

Born of frustration

--Born of Frustration, James