

# Ridin' Out the Storm

## A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 13

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### Weather Report: 3500-13

#### Part 1

“It’s a lot harder leaving this time,” Rex said.

I nodded. I knew what he meant. Seeing Shelandra again, having a night on the town, then giving it up and going back to the grind was somehow much harder than when we first boarded our scout ship all those months ago.

Our old scout ship. Thinking about it bugged me somehow.

We were in our quarters, enjoying the last fifteen minutes before lights out. I stared out the window at the fleet re-assembling into cruising order. Flagship in the middle, of course. Being a destroyer, we were on the perimeter, screening the flagship from any surprise attack.

I was mildly surprised to see the *Starfall* to port and slightly astern of the *Heir Apparent*. Usually we were to its starboard. I didn’t care enough to wonder about the change.

Looking at the *Heir Apparent*, I thought of our friend, so close yet so far. I said, “I asked Shelandra if she was still a gunner, but she didn’t say. Did she mention anything to you?”

Rex shook his head. “She emphatically didn’t want to talk about our duties. I even tried to tell her what we did, and she held

up her hand and said, ‘I don’t wanna know. Tell me after the war.’”

I let out the slightest of chuckles at that, because that sounded just like Shelandra.

Night shift sounded and we hit the pillows. But something was bugging me even as I drifted to sleep, and my dreams were weird. They were almost like fever dreams. I woke around 0100 with a start, bathed in sweat and feeling sick. Not sick with disease, but sick with certainty.

For my subconscious had been working something out in those fever dreams, and I hated what I now knew.

I never did get back to sleep, and the next day I was very, very quiet, working on autopilot. It was blazingly obvious I was not okay, but Rex was kind enough to give me time. He waited until lunch clean-up to ask what was up.

I just shook my head. “Do you mind handling things on your own a few hours? There’s something I have to do.”

He nodded. He knew I’d tell him what was wrong when I was ready.

I headed to our tiny shuttle bay. The destroyer didn’t carry fighters so we had no hangar, but we did have a tiny dock for very small shuttles for intership travel. And when I say very small, I mean they’re so basic they don’t even show up on the manifest as independent craft. Each shuttle

consists of an airtight bubble, an engine, an airlock, and a prayer.

We had one permanently docked. I asked the duty officer for permission to use it to visit the flagship.

“You got an order from Captain Jefferson?” he asked.

“No.”

“Get lost.”

“Please? It’ll only be for an hour.”

“Oh, yeah? And what happens when you’re not back in an hour?”

“You can report me AWOL. Say I stole the shuttle.”

“They would execute you.”

“I know. That’s my guarantee I’ll be back in an hour.”

He scowled at me, but jerked his head to the shuttle. Five minutes later I was standing in a corridor on the *Heir Apparent*.

This ship was a lot nicer and shinier than mine.

I found the nearest general-purpose terminal and queried Shelandra’s post. The answer didn’t surprise me.

I headed forward, my heart pounding.

I stuck my head into the subcommand center, and there she was, operating a bank of long-range sensors.

It was called the *subcommand center* because it was the post for all of Admiral Brighton’s lower personal staff. People who answered directly to him, but weren’t important enough to be on the bridge.

I waved a hand to get her attention. She saw me and her eyes bugged wide. I jerked my head back towards the corridor. She nodded. I stepped out. Thirty seconds later, she joined me.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“We need somewhere private.”

She gave me an odd look. I could tell she wanted to make the obvious joke, but she seemed to sense it wouldn’t be funny.

She led me to a store room and shut the door. We were alone.

She asked, “So what’s-”

I slapped her. Hard.

She remained turned away, holding the side of her face, for several moments. Then she slowly turned to look at me. For a full minute, she gazed at me in heartache while I glared at her in rage. It felt like a century.

At long last, she whispered, “What gave it away?”

I could barely get the words out. “On shore leave, you said you didn’t want to talk about work. So we didn’t. You never once asked what Rex and I do. But then at the end of the night, when we said good-bye...” I felt the tears come. “You told us to stay safe in our kitchen. Suddenly, you knew our post. Even though we never told you.”

She slowly nodded. “I remember. I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly, either.”

“You weren’t thinking at all!” I thundered. “Shelandra, what did you do?”

“I saved your lives!” she shot back. “Admiral Brighton sent you and Rex on a one-way trip to deep space! Your job was to find the Heart of Fire homeworld and die!”

“How the hell do you know?”

“I overheard his adjutant talking about it. I found a terminal with command clearance. I can access it at night when no one’s looking. I checked the orders, and it was true! You and Rex were doomed!”

“So you reassigned us?”

“Yes, using Admiral Brighton’s log-in. I thought I covered my tracks.”

I picked up a box of computer parts and threw it across the room. “You killed two men!” I screamed.

“I don’t care!” she screamed back. “My best friends were going to die! What else was I going to do?”

I paced around the small room, fuming, running my hands through my hair. “I never wanted someone else to die in my place.” I glared at her again. “What gives you the right to decide who lives and who dies?”

“The same thing that gives *them* the right! None of us asked for this stupid war! We signed up to defend our home, not to feed an immature brat’s ego!”

I turned to go. I activated the door control, but Shelandra jumped forward and slammed her hand against it, closing it again.

“Answer me, Jake! You had the guts to come over here and slap me, so have the guts to answer my question! What else was I going to do? Come on! I dare you! If you had been in my position, and you had the power to save my life by switching my duties with a stranger, what would you have done?”

I glared at her.

“Answer me!” she screamed.

We stared at each other for the longest time. A million answers formed and died in my head, each turning to smoke and dust. Somewhere along the way I reached out and held her close. I don’t remember doing it.

“You were alone,” I said softly. “You could never have discussed what you knew with anyone. You had the power to make a difference, so you had to make an impossible choice with no one to ask for advice or help.”

We were both weeping.

I said, “In a galaxy mad with war, you did the only thing you could, knowing that no matter what you did, it would always be wrong.”

She sobbed for a long time. For the first time in almost a year, someone finally knew and understood her secret. And instead of recognizing her private hell and helping her, I had piled on and condemned her. There was no end to the shame I felt. I tightened my grip, and held her as close as I could.

She finally finished crying, and pulled away to look at me.

“I’m sorry for slapping you,” I whispered. “I would give anything to take that back. If you can ever forgive me, please do.”

She held the side of my face. “Only if you can forgive me,” she said. And smiled.

Then we were thrown into each other’s arms again as a missile struck the *Heir Apparent* and the ship lurched sideways.