

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 4

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Weather Report: 3500-04

We have met the enemy, and the enemy is...bad at cards.

We have officially had our first encounter with someone from another empire. That's what happens when you get sent as deep into space as possible, as fast as possible. You make new acquaintances.

In this case, it was a scout ship a lot like ours, from the empire Still Standing. (Really, what is it with emperors? Is it a *rule* that they have to come up with stupid names? Instead of going to war, why don't they just have a naming contest and leave the rest of us alone?)

Regulations forbid us from charting the system when a foreign empire is present. The brass is terrified that the enemy will capture one of the survey bots and hack it for intel, or steal our superior surveying technology. And yes, that was sarcasm.

Regulations also forbid us from consorting with the enemy. If we do, we'll get tried for treason and shot, and maybe not even in that order. Rex and I both know that. So of course, the first thing we did was dock with the other scout ship and have a party. And when I say party, I mean we had a few beers, swapped stories, and gambled for the galaxy.

There was only one pilot on the other ship. His name was Vance. He was a Gerandlian, the first I'd ever met. Gerandlians have four feet, four hands, and deep purple skin. His extra hands meant that he didn't need a copilot, which in turn meant that he was lonelier than we were.

Just like us, he didn't want to be out here. He was drafted. Said his passion was ballet. All he really wanted to do was dance.

I blurted out, "So *Vance* likes to *dance!*" and gave him my patented Big Stupid Grin. He just stared at me and said, "Yeah, I've only heard that a few hundred times in my life."

Vance had just finished charting the system when we arrived, and he was basically twiddling his four thumbs. He didn't receive any new orders after sending his survey report. "I think they forgot about me," he said. (He didn't offer to share his survey report with us, and we didn't ask.)

He told us what was going on back on his homeworld, and it's even worse than ours. Instead of a toddler in charge, his emperor is a psychopath with a bloodlust. I honestly don't know which is better. On his homeworld, the people now line up for food rations, work in the weapon factories, and sleep. Someone attempted a revolution, but it didn't get very far.

When we mentioned that the only thing we had to do on our ship was play checkers, Vance told us that he has decks of cards! And he even gave us one! Woo hoo!

So we all shut out the universal madness, got drunk, and played blindsides for a while. But we didn't play for money, we had higher stakes. We each started with a third of the galaxy and played until one of us (that would be Rex) had won all the star systems. Rex even got a royal fizzbin in the third hand, the lucky bastard.

I hope Vance is great at ballet, because he was terrible at blindsides.

I also hope Vance rides out the storm. He seemed like a good guy. He tried to hide it, but I could tell that he was really, really scared. I think he doesn't expect to survive this. If he's like me and Rex, he probably does everything in his power to avoid thinking about it.

We each reported the other's presence back to our respective homeworlds (I didn't want to, but we had to, because CC would have found out anyway when they downloaded the automatic logs). CC was furious that we hadn't charted the new system. The fact that it was their own regulations which prevented us from doing so was completely lost on them. Vance laughed and said his CC behaves the same way.

Rex dropped his pants and sent CC a video of his hairy butt, along with the words, "Survey report: all we found was this moon." Vance howled, and I laughed so hard I almost passed out.

Vance received orders to get to his next star system. We wished him well and he took off.

Once he had gone, we ordered our survey bots into action, but they didn't move. When we politely asked the computer why the survey bots wouldn't deploy, the computer politely informed us that it had detected another foreign scout ship in the system.

Then the computer told us that it had no way of knowing if this new ship had just arrived...or if it had been there watching us all along.