

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 11

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Weather Report: 3500-11

Rex and I thought we had finally learned everything about our new job. The battle alert proved us wrong.

One would think soldiers on a destroyer in wartime would know what to do during a battle. It's pretty much right there in the job description. In the case of Rex and yours truly, one would be wrong.

We're cooks. The kitchen is our station. It had never occurred to us that we might need to do something else, or perhaps take shelter, if an actual battle happened.

We were peeling potatoes when we heard a distant *boom*, the ship rattled, the alert went off, and overhead lights throughout the ship turned red.

(Why do the lights turn red? Red is the color which makes us angrier and more energetic, so I guess their purpose is make us fight harder and meaner. I dunno. I think it just makes it harder to see.)

So there we were, ankle-deep in potato skins and no idea what to do. Soldiers, on a destroyer, in a battle, absolutely clueless. We had achieved a new low.

Part of me even wants to believe that we will never get any lower, but I've underestimated our talent before.

"Let's go to sick bay," I said. "We can help with the wounded." Rex nodded, and off we went.

And score one for us: we learned later that *this is exactly what we're supposed to do*.

Last week, the *Starfall* had joined the main fleet, centered around Admiral Brighton on the *Heir Apparent*. Today, we were surprised by a small, quick flotilla from Still Standing, who got their hits in first, but were no match for our big bruisers. The battle lasted about five hours. (We won, by the way. That's why we're still here.)

There weren't that many wounded. The vacuum and cold of space tends to enforce a binary state: alive or dead. If you're wounded but can somehow still reach a medical bay, you're one lucky son of a gun.

Afterwards, Rex and I found a window and gazed at the wreckage. Burning and cracked-open spacecraft, debris, and a few corpses floated in infinity. We said nothing. I felt sick. We went back to our potatoes.

Most of the crew was in a jolly good mood during dinner, ecstatic over our victory. Rex and I were much more somber. We had no rapport with our shipmates. We felt more alone than we had on the scout ship.

When Jerry came through the line, he made eye contact and gave a slight head bob, indicating he had news, so we were not surprised to see him later. Rex and I were cleaning tables in an otherwise empty mess when he sauntered in.

"Special order?" he asked.

Rex placed a nice steak, medium rare, in front of him. Jerry smiled and said, "Ahhhhhh." He ate while we cleaned, and we made small talk. When he was finished, he sat back, satisfied, and said, "Well, I don't know who you two dudes are, or who

you're supposed to be, but you're a lot more important than you think."

"Do tell," Rex said.

"I found the order to transfer you to the *Starfall*, and guess what? The person who gave the order doesn't exist."

"That doesn't make sense," I said.

Jerry shrugged. "The personnel ID number doesn't belong to anyone. That ID number is a dedicated tie to the personnel table; the database was set up in such a way that it wouldn't allow anyone to enter a fake number in that field. But someone altered the relationship settings to allow fake numbers, then put one in."

"Wow!" Rex said.

"But that's not all," Jerry said. "Someone altered the time stamp of your transfer, too."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"Personnel changes are stored sequentially. The time stamps are in chronological order all the way through the table, except your transfer. According to its time stamp, it was created six hours after the next record, so I know it's bunk."

"But who would do that?" I asked in desperation. "And why?"

"I don't know about the why, but I think I know who," Jerry said. "You see, there's another table most people don't know about. It logs the commands themselves. Our mystery person didn't know that." He smirked. "Whoever entered your transfer did so during a seven-hour time frame; I know that because of the personnel change records before and after it. So I searched the second table for records of any personnel change commands made during that time frame, and there was only one."

"Yeah?" Rex asked. We were all ears.

Jerry shook his head in disbelief. "It seems your transfer came straight from Admiral Brighton himself, and he covered it up."

Rex and I could only stare.