

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 12

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Weather Report: 3500-12

Jerry accompanied us to the hatch but could go no further. As a convict, he wasn't allowed off the ship, even with his bracelet. The sentry eyed him warily. We stood to one side while many of our shipmates disembarked for the first leave we'd had since the war started.

"I want you dudes to have a few drinks on my behalf," Jerry said.

"Will do," I said.

"Not a problem," Rex echoed.

The voice over the PA said, "All personnel must be back at your posts by 1400 tomorrow."

Rex sighed. "How many times are they going to tell us that?"

"They're just assuming we're stupid and that we'll be drunk all night," I said. "For once, I can't really blame 'em."

Jerry nodded in the direction away from the ship, across the hanger. "Check it out," he said quietly. "There's your buddy."

We looked, and there, indeed, was our "buddy." Our flagship, the Heir Apparent, was parked about 50 meters away. Admiral Brighton, followed by his senior staff, had just disembarked and was heading for the officers' lift. We only saw him for a few seconds before he disappeared through the door.

"Maybe you'll get a chance to meet him before the night's over," Jerry quipped. "Slip him a martini and ask him what's up."

"I doubt the Admiral frequents the same bars we do," I said quietly.

"Welp, you never know," Jerry said, and held up his hand to indicate the cool bro handclasp, which we each dutifully gave. He disappeared back into the ship and Rex and I walked down the ramp.

For the first time in a year, we were home.

Halfway across the hanger, we were attacked. I don't mean our homeworld was attacked, I mean me and Rex. We were grabbed from behind and pulled into a gigantic hug.

"Guuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuys!" Shelandra squealed. "What are you doing heeeeeeeeeeeeeere?!"

"Getting asphyxiated," I wheezed. I never knew she was that strong.

She let me go so she could hug Rex some more, which gave me a quick chance to wipe my tears away, then she hugged me again.

"I thought you two were on a scout ship!" she said after finally letting me go.

"We were," Rex said. "Now we're on Starfall."

Her eyes bugged out. "When did this happen?"

“Six weeks ago,” I said. “Are you still on the flagship?”

“I am!” she said.

Standing politely behind her were four of her shipmates. She was obviously with them, and they were waiting while she greeted her old friends. She introduced us, hands were shook all around, and we headed out as one big party to hit the night life. The nice person on the PA once again told us to be back by 1400.

As we walked beneath the neon lights, Rex quickly had a private word with me. “Don’t tell Shelandra about our mystery,” he whispered.

“Why?” I asked.

“She’s stationed on the Heir Apparent. That’s too close to Admiral Brighton. You know her; the moment we tell her what’s going on, she’ll insist on snooping around even if we tell her not to.” He glanced at her. “Whatever’s going on, it can’t possibly be good, so let’s keep her as uninvolved as we can. I’d rather die than get Shelandra in trouble.”

I nodded agreement.

We drank, danced, played pool, and drank some more. Probably in that order. I dunno.

“What are you up to on the flagship?” I asked Shelandra at one point, shouting over the music. “Are you still a gunner?”

She took a long pull from her daquiri, smacked her lips, and said, “I. Do. Not. Want. To. Talk. About. Work. Tonight.”

“Fair enough!” I said, and we clinked glasses.

The ones from the Heir Apparent wanted to call it a night long before I did.

“We don’t have to be back until...” I swayed on my feet and looked at Rex. “What was it again?”

“1400,” Shelandra said.

“You sure that was it?” I asked.

“I’m sure.”

“Well, that’s...” I tried to count on my fingers and failed. “A lot of hours from now.”

She tapped my head. “You’re not thinking, Jake.”

“I’m not being paid to think right now, Shelandra.”

“We’re not just supposed to be back at 1400. We’re supposed to be back on duty at 1400. That means awake and sober.”

I stared at her. I knew her words were supposed to make some kind of sense, but I was really having trouble getting there.

“Jake, have I ever led you wrong?” she asked.

I didn’t think it was fair to hit me with a new question before I’d finished absorbing her previous statement. I wasn’t able to keep up with the change in topic.

I gave up. “Not thinking tonight, Shelandra.”

“I know, so let me think for you,” she said. “We’re leaving now. I know you don’t understand, but you will later, and that’s all you to need to know.”

Rex put his arm around my shoulders. “She speaks truthiness. Lessgo.”

We weaved our way back to the hanger. I’m glad someone knew the way. I just followed.

Shelandra's friends said they were glad to meet us, wished us good night, and boarded their ship.

Shelandra hugged me and Rex a long time. It was one of those drunk hugs where we take 20 minutes to say good-bye, and we wept. "I'm so glad you guys are safe and off that scout ship!" she wailed. "I thought I'd never see you again. You stay safe in that kitchen of yours, you hear me?"

We assured her we would. We finally departed and boarded our respective ships.

The next evening, Rex and I made dinner for 516 people even though we had pounding migraines.

Worth it.