

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 14

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Weather Report: 3500-13

Part 2

Together, Shelandra and I hit a shelf and fell. The shelf tilted forward and dumped a dozen coiled cables on us. I'd never been so entangled in my life. If it weren't for the explosion and the blaring alarm, it would have been hilarious.

We made quite the comedy duo as we frantically untangled ourselves from the cables and from each other.

Shelandra somehow got to her feet while I was still shaking the final cable from my foot. She charged out the door and forward along the corridor. With nothing better to do, I followed.

Just as I caught up with Shelandra, a small explosion twenty meters ahead warped the corridor and left our ears ringing. We shielded our faces from the flying dust and debris. When we looked again, we saw a trooper pinned under a beam and part of the wall. He was straining to free himself, but he was obviously trapped. His face was covered with dust, and the side of his head was bleeding.

We ran to help him, but he waved us off. "There's no one manning the port forward guns!" he managed to choke out between coughs.

Instantly, Shelandra leaped over the fallen beam and was gone, racing forward.

I crouched and put my hands beneath the beam, trying to figure out the best way to do this.

"Didn't you hear me?" the trooper asked. "I'm-"

"My friend's a gunner," I said. "I'm just a cook, I can't help her, so I might as well help you."

Despite his pain, he gave me a funny look. "A cook?"

"Cook, scout, all-around scoundrel. I can lift this beam maybe an inch or two, and only for a few seconds. Will that be enough?"

"It'll have to be."

"Three-count." I braced myself. "One, two, three!"

I lifted with everything I had and felt something pop in my back. I had to shut my eyes and scream to keep ahold of the beam.

"Let go!" the trooper said.

I did, and knelt there, catching my breath. Then I looked up and saw that he was free, and gingerly climbing to his feet. I did the same, knowing my back would feel a million times worse in the morning. If there was a morning.

He held out his hand. "Trooper Cody Averson."

I shook it. "Private Jake Storm."

"Thanks, Storm. I'll see you around some day."

I nodded and he was off, towards the stern to join his fellow troopers. If we were boarded, they would be our first defense.

I ran forward and found Shelandra. She was wiping sweat and dust out of her eyes while searching for targets. The gun alcove was a mess. I tried to ignore the previous gunner, lying beneath a pile of debris by the far wall, obviously beyond help.

"The guy who was pinned will be fine," I said. "I notice a distinct lack of lights on these screens and buttons."

"Observant as ever, Jake," she said, and loosed off a few shots. "Systems down. I'm all manual here. Make yourself useful and clean the viewport."

I took off my uniform top and used my undershirt to wipe dust off the viewport, but all it did was smear it with my sweat and make it worse.

"Thanks," she said. "I think you just doomed us."

"That's my forte." I rubbed the grime away vigorously with my hands, just swiping it off the viewport as fast as I could. It actually worked.

We looked out at the battle.

It didn't look good.

The *Starfall* was on fire. I gazed at it. A snarky part of my brain wondered if I still needed to return the shuttle in less than an hour. A much less snarky part hoped Rex was okay.

The rest of our fleet didn't look so hot, either. We were taking a pounding.

"Who's attacking us?" I asked. I tossed my undershirt aside and put my uniform top back on. (Even I have a sense of protocol.)

"Still Standing. And their weapons are more powerful than ours. They must have devoted part of their war machine to tech improvement."

A squadron of seven one-man enemy fighters approached. They came in on the *Heir Apparent's* horizontal axis, which meant they were unafraid of our guns. They fired. Shelandra fired back. She hit one. It spun out of control and away from the fight.

I gazed left and right out the viewscreen at the complete lack of any other activity. "Is this the only active gun on this side of the ship?" I asked incredulously.

"Probably. Find another gun and fire."

"How do I work it?"

"Put your eyes here, use this scope, line up cross hairs, pull trigger."

Through the viewport was a bright flash, making us wince and look away for a second. When we looked again, a second enemy fleet had arrived.

"Oh," Shelandra said quietly. "That's unfortunate."

The PA system crackled to life. The speaker in the gun alcove wasn't working, but we could still hear the announcement from the speaker in the corridor.

"The arriving fleet is the Heart of Fire," the voice on the PA said. "They are our allies, and are here to help. I repeat: we now have a treaty with the Heart of Fire. Do not attack the Heart of Fire. Death to Still Standing!"

The Heart of Fire fleet was as big as ours and Still Standing's put together. That

alone told me someone knew how to run an empire better than us.

The Heart of Fire tore into Still Standing, which immediately turned away from us to face the more powerful enemy.

The squadron harassing the *Heir Apparent* didn't break away, however. Intent on finishing us off, they circled for another run. They seemed to be targeting the bridge. They could have taken out this final gun easily if they'd wanted, but it wasn't bothering them enough. They'd probably been given strict orders to focus solely on the flagship's bridge.

Something about the enemy squadron caught my eye, and I looked very carefully at one of the fighters. It looked like it was lagging after the others, and I could have sworn it hadn't fired on the initial run.

I watched it closely. Again, it held back, slightly behind its fellows, and didn't fire. But it seemed to be in perfect working order.

It could have been just a computer failure on that ship, but the lack of energy in its attack run told me something else.

Not all soldiers pressed into war against their will want to kill.

I looked around the gun alcove. "Manual binoculars or telescopes?"

"Jake, find a gun!"

I shook my head. "Trust me. Tell me."

She quickly pointed to a compartment near the floor and resumed firing.

I pulled out a monoscope. It had automatic focusing and was still working.

The enemy squadron was making its third run. I focused the scope on the cockpit of the mysterious fighter which wasn't fighting.

I gasped, and shouted, "Don't let anyone kill me while I'm out there, and don't shoot that fighter that's hanging back!" I pointed out the fighter in question, then took off.

"Out what?" she screeched after me. "Jake!"

I sprinted, my back complaining every step, and found the hangar partially serviceable. That was good enough. I ran to my shuttle.

"Deserter!" I heard someone yell from a distance.

I called over my shoulder, "No! On a mission!" I couldn't even see who had spoken.

I climbed into the shuttle, maneuvered it around some wreckage, and got it into space. I headed for the enemy squadron.

I could swear that even through the emptiness of space I could hear Shelandra screeching at me with every curse word she knew. And she knew a few. Her rage must have been impressive, for she took out two more enemy craft.

As I approached the strange fighter, I somehow coaxed the shuttle to perform a back flip. The enemy pilot, seeing this nutjob enter a battle in an unarmed ship engaging in frivolity, swooped to take a closer look. The rest of his squadron was busy.

I waved to the pilot. He stared at me, then, incredulous, waved back.

I held up my wrists in a position which mimed someone in handcuffs, pointed at myself, pointed at him, and pointed at the *Heir Apparent's* hangar.

The pilot nodded.

I flew back to the hangar, and he followed. We landed together.

A squad of troopers led by a lieutenant rushed into the hangar, guns drawn, heading for the enemy fighter.

I scrambled out of the shuttle and yelled, "Wait! He's not attacking, he's my prisoner! I just took this man prisoner!"

The lieutenant looked me in disbelief. "A *private* just took a prisoner?"

"Strange day," I said, breathing hard. "But do not shoot this man. I will take full responsibility for him."

"A private can't take responsibility for something like that!" the lieutenant shouted.

"Actually, he's just a cook," one of the troopers said. "But you can trust him, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant looked with amazement at Trooper Cody Averson, who just nodded and put away his gun.

I smiled at Cody, then motioned for the pilot to exit his fighter. He did, his large, bare purple feet slapping onto the deck.

"Hi, Jake," he said. "Thanks for the peaceful arrest. I think."

"Hey Vance," I said. "You're welcome. I think."