

# Ridin' Out the Storm

## A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 15

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### Weather Report: 3500-13

#### Part 3

The lieutenant narrowed his eyes at me. “Explain.”

“This man’s name is Vance,” I said. “We met before the war. He was drafted to fight against his will. He has surrendered peacefully and will cooperate. It’s okay.”

Keeping his hands up, Vance nodded.

“Both of you come with me,” the lieutenant said.

“Let’s go, Vance,” I said. “They won’t be any more harsh than that instructor at band camp.”

“Band camp,” Vance said, catching on as quickly as I’d hoped. “How could I forget?”

We marched to the brig. Well, everyone else marched; I sort of schlepped. Never was much of a marcher. Along the way we heard the announcement: “Return to yellow alert. Our allies have triumphed! The battle is ours!”

*You mean the battle is theirs*, I thought, thinking of the Heart of Fire. *They* had triumphed; *we* had gotten our butts kicked. But I dared not say that aloud.

I was grateful to see they booked Vance peacefully. I was even more grateful – and surprised – to see Shelandra show up while they were fingerprinting him.

“Who’s manning the gun?” I asked her quietly. I knew she would never leave the ship undefended.

“I snagged a friend to take over,” she whispered. “I feigned an injury. Not my proudest moment.”

I squeezed her hand. “You’ve had so many proud moments in the last thirty minutes, I don’t even know where to begin.”

She actually blushed, then whispered, “Now spill. Fast.”

I nodded to Vance. “Vance, friend, not a killer. Just trying to save a life.”

The lieutenant noticed Shelandra and barked, “Special Gunner, what are you doing here?”

“I witnessed the capture of this prisoner, so I’m here to inquire if you need a statement.”

Oh, she is smooth, my Shelandra. My great friend since childhood. Sooooo smooth.

“No statement needed. We have video evidence from the battle.”

“May we visit the prisoner?” I asked.

“A few moments only.”

Vance stepped into a cell and they activated the force field. The lieutenant led the troopers away, Cody and I bumping fists as he passed.

Noticing this, Shelandra said, "You've only been on this ship thirty minutes, and you're already friends with half the damn crew."

I buffed my nails as we stepped towards Vance's cell. "I'm Jake Storm, baby." To Vance, I asked, "How ya doin'?"

"Great. You saved my life."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe I made it worse."

Vance shook his head. "You heard. My fleet lost. We have orders never to be taken alive, to fight to the last plasma bolt and the last ounce of strength. If you guys hadn't blown me up, my own commander would have. So yeah, I'm actually on cloud nine right now." He sounded so casual. I wondered if that was normal for people of his race.

"Before we do anything else, we need to coordinate our story," I said quietly. "We were acquainted at an interstellar band camp in high school, but only for a few days. We really don't know each other that well, but we bonded as underage drinking buddies. We suffered under a really mean instructor named Cooper. We illegally stayed drunk a lot; that will explain why we can't remember much else about a week which happened so long ago."

"Sounds flimsy," Vance said.

"Got anything better?" I asked.

"Nope," he said.

"This is Shelandra, one of my dearest friends."

"Pleased to meet you, Shelandra."

Shelandra smiled. "Likewise."

"Do you think they'll torture me?" Vance asked.

"I really don't know," I said. "I don't know what you're comfortable revealing about your home—"

"Pffft!" Vance interrupted. "I'll tell them the absolute truth: they know more about my people than I do. Our officers specifically told us nothing about anything beyond the ship we were on. If we asked, we were punished. Everything was need to know. I literally have no idea how many ships we have, where they are, or what my home world's defenses are. Your people already know where my home world is; I know that much because we found some of your scouts in our system. There's absolutely nothing I could reveal that they don't already know."

"But will they believe you?" I asked. He shrugged.

"I think I know how to make the best of this situation," Shelandra said. "Jake, get back to *Starfall*. You're probably not even supposed to be here. Let me handle this."

"What's your plan?" I asked.

"For you to get back to *Starfall*. Go."

"No, you can't just drop a statement on me like that and then send me packing."

She smiled. "Sure I can."

I glared at her, and realized that yes, she could.

The shuttle had been shoved to one side to make room for the returning fighters. Hoping it wasn't damaged, I climbed in and powered up. Several flight controllers gave me puzzled looks, but I just nodded and waved in a way which was vaguely intended as a *I'm good to go, thanks for asking, yes, I'm totally supposed to be here*

kind of way and took off before anyone could object.

All in all, I returned the shuttle a full 45 minutes beyond the time I'd promised to have it back. But the *Starfall* was just then putting out its last fires and rescuing its final few wounded, so the shuttle bay was unmanned.

I rushed to sick bay to help. No one questioned my late arrival. Covered as I was in grime and a few minor burns from the explosion on the *Heir Apparent*, it was obvious I'd been busy. My heart soared to see Rex there, alive and well. Jerry was one of the wounded, but not severely; his leg had caught a bit of hot metal shrapnel.

Two hours later, Rex and I were back in the kitchen frantically preparing dinner. Battle makes people hungry. We produced a giant pot of your basic stew and a stack of bowls, and people wandered in to feed themselves throughout the day as things slowly got back to normal.

Rex and I finally had a moment to ourselves in the kitchen a half hour before lights out. We were starving. It's always the cooks who eat last.

It was the first time we could talk since the battle.

We wearily sat at the kitchen island with a couple of bowls of mediocre stew and dug in.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," I said.

"S'allright, man," Rex said with a shrug. "You know you have nothing to prove to me."

"I'm not talking about proving anything, I'm just saying I'm sorry I wasn't here."

He gave a tired smile and a tiny laugh. "Did you do what you needed?"

"Yeah. And forgive me for not telling you about it just yet. I'd like to, but I can't, because it's not my place." I ached to tell Rex I had solved our mystery, but I would not deprive Shelandra of her dignity. That was a talk Shelandra and Rex needed to have.

Rex just nodded. "No prob."

I smiled at him, grateful he was my friend, and so understanding. "Thank you," I said quietly.

Rex just nodded and grinned again. It was all good with him.

"I was glad to see Jerry was okay," I said. "But I guess a guy like him will always come out on top somehow."

"He's just damned lucky," Rex said. "We only got hit with a single bombardment, right at the beginning. It put us out of the fight *immediately*. Still Standing didn't finish us off because we weren't a threat any more; the *Heir Apparent* was the real target, and they weren't gonna waste time on us while our other ships could still shoot. I'm sure they would have come back to put us out of our misery once the battle was over."

He finished his stew and pushed the bowl away. "But here's the funny thing. Jerry wasn't hurt in that bombardment. The machine shop wasn't hit." Rex was silent for a moment. "But it's right next to the engine room, which *was* hit. Jerry heard people calling for help. He dragged some of them from the fire. His leg got dinged when one of the engines blew." Rex paused a moment. "He saved eight people."

I was silent also as I absorbed this.

"Huh," I finally said. "I do believe we need to give that man another steak."

Rex thought about it. "You know...he'd probably appreciate that more than a medal."