

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 20

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Weather Report: 3501-01

Part 1

We overran the colony's defenses easily. No surprise. If you blinked three times you'd have missed the whole thing. The *Starfall* saw no action, so Jerry and Shelandra's date was ruined for nothing.

To save time, the drop ships had entered the system with us. It was a tiny risk to expose them to the dangers of a battle, but no one had expected any difficulty, nor had there been.

There was some cleanup work to do after the battle, along with the battle review, so the drop ships wouldn't start demolishing the colony itself for another fortnight.

At midmorning the day after the battle, Vance, Rex, and I were in the kitchen, while Shelandra relaxed in the mess catching up on the news. I'd just finished unloading the dishwasher when in walked Captain Jefferson. Alone.

The Captain entered from the corridor, and I knew Shelandra couldn't see the Captain's arrival from where she was sitting. Rex, Vance, and I hastily stood to attention, feeling extremely awkward.

"Good morning, ma'am," I said, just a touch too loudly, hoping Shelandra would hear.

"Morning, gents," the Captain said. "At ease."

We relaxed a tiny bit, but ease was definitely not what we were feeling. The Captain had never visited us, nor did she have any need to, as far as we knew. If she ever had anything to say, she summoned us. This was *highly* irregular...and I didn't like it. I knew Rex was feeling the same.

Shelandra came quick-trotting in and also stood at ease. "Morning, Captain," she said brightly.

"Good morning, MP," the Captain said. "Good to see you're diligently keeping watch over our captive." She said this without a trace of sarcasm, which made it the most sarcastic thing she could possibly have said.

Shelandra turned a little red. We all could have protested that Shelandra being in a connecting room while a non-violent and cooperative prisoner did his work was more than enough supervision, but the Captain didn't actually seem to care, and it wasn't worth the argument.

Captain Jefferson strolled and looked around, somehow acting casual without being casual in the slightest. "The four of you will be pulling double duty tonight," she said. "During dinner, you will assist in the kitchen and conference room on the *Heir Apparent*. Dinner aboard the *Starfall* will be self-serve: set it up before you go, clean it up when you get back."

I asked, "With all due respect, ma'am, do they not have kitchen staff aboard the flagship?"

I could practically hear Shelandra and Rex's toes curling. The Captain slowly and casually regarded me with a coldly appraising eye, and I realized I had perhaps taken the concept of *at ease* a bit too far.

"As I was about to say, Private Storm, if you would allow me to continue without interruption...the fleet's officers are having a banquet aboard the flagship, to celebrate taking the colony. We need the extra staff." Still acting casual, she shot the tiniest glance toward Vance. "They're also curious to see the captive working in person."

She finally stopped acting casual and eyed each of us directly. "Dress blues and greens. Make sure your buttons are polished. And for the love of everything sacred...don't embarrass me."

She left.

"*Embarrass* her?" Rex asked. "Who does she think we are?!"

"The hell was that about?" Shelandra asked softly.

"Surprise inspection," I said. "The info dump was just an excuse to do it."

"No," Shelandra said thoughtfully. "There was more to it than that."

"And a *banquet* to celebrate an entire fleet conquering two defenseless supply ships and a tiny destroyer?" Rex asked incredulously. "What are they gonna do next, steal candy from a baby and give themselves a medal?"

"We're definitely setting the bar low around here," Shelandra said.

Veronica and Janice walked in.

"Hey there," Janice said. "We only have a moment, but we stopped by to let you know we won't be around tonight. We have to attend some banquet on the flagship."

"Yeah, we'll be there, too," Rex said.

They were surprised. "Really?" Veronica asked. "I thought it was just for high-ranking officers and special guests."

I looked smug and said, "Oh, we're pretty special."

"We really will be there," Shelandra said. "Just not in the same way you will."

Rex and I peeked into the conference room from the serving room. "I don't know what to do," I whispered. "Am I supposed to put a towel over one arm and pour champagne with the other?"

"I don't even know what that means," Rex whispered back.

"It's what waiters in tuxedos do in old movies."

"Privates!" a woman's harsh voice barked from behind us, and we jumped. We turned to face Sargeant Cranston, the old battle axe who ran all three kitchens on the *Heir Apparent*. "You, table three. You, table four. Fill their glasses, ask what they need. Move!"

We moved.

It was like that all evening. Luckily, the table I served was on the opposite side of the room from Admiral Brighton's, and I didn't interact with him. I had no idea if he remembered me, but I wasn't taking any chances. Especially since he expected me to be dead by now.

Janice and Veronica sat at a table near the Admiral. It was a social way of telling them

they were important guests, but not important enough to be seated with the Admiral.

Captain Jefferson wasn't sitting at my table, for which I was grateful, but she was sitting at the table next to mine.

Shelandra stood at attention by the wall the entire evening. That was her sole job, to show everyone how diligently she was watching Vance.

I noticed that several officers, including Captain Jefferson, each had a three-ring binder. A couple of them were at my table. The binders looked identical, and each was marked simply "P.A." I couldn't tell why some officers had one and others didn't.

They ordered Vance to push a drink cart around the room the entire evening. Everyone constantly gazed at him like he was a zoo specimen, and talked about him as if he wasn't there. I almost expected them to order him to jump up and down just for the power trip. Vance took it all in stride, but I had to restrain myself on more than one occasion from "accidentally" tripping and flinging soup all over them. Captain Jefferson's admonishment not to embarrass her rang in my ears.

Then it happened. Somewhere around dessert, when laughter was a little louder and tongues were wagging a bit more freely, from a table beside the one I was serving, I heard the words *Project Avalanche*.

Rex and I locked eyes, just for a moment. He had heard it, too.

By paying attention to their voices, I eventually identified the one who had spoken the words, a man in a captain's uniform. I asked another private who he was, and learned he was Captain Volley of the *Raging Bull*, a cruiser.

I studied him a moment. He and Captain Jefferson were looking through one of the binders, nodding in agreement about something.

It clicked. "P.A." Project Avalanche.

Of the two officers at my table who had a copy, neither opened their binder, so I couldn't steal a glance at the contents. Veronica and Janice's future – and perhaps all of our futures – were in that binder. But I couldn't do anything about it!

After dinner, the Admiral invited everyone to stand and join him in a toast. Then everyone, being in a fairly good mood, slowly drifted out the door as the evening came to a pleasant end.

I started to clear my table onto a cart...and saw that one of the officers had left his binder.

Looking at it more closely, I now saw the "Top Secret" seal on its spine and in the lower left corner of the cover...meaning a possible death penalty for anyone reading it or possessing it without authorization.

No one was paying attention, and I had a split second to make a decision.