

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 21

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Weather Report: 3501-01

Part 2

Without pausing to think, I casually scooped the binder toward me along with used napkins, not looking at it at all, treating it like any other trash. For the moment, it could sit in my cart's rubbish bin. If anyone found it, I could claim ignorance. *Just clearin' the table, folks, like I was ordered. No, I don't read books, I'm just a private.*

A major who had been sitting at my table suddenly rushed back into the conference room, a look of panic on his face. He hurried to the table as best he could while not entirely sober. He frantically looked all over the table and under it.

"Lose something, sir?" I asked.

"Uh...a binder," he said.

Still acting casual, like it was nothing to me, I poked around my rubbish basket, as if I only had a half memory of a binder. "Oh, uh, you mean this?" I took out the binder, brushed some wilted lettuce off the front, and held it out to him.

"Yes, thank you!" He grabbed it and rushed off, looking as relieved as a person who had just avoided a death sentence could look.

I felt the same. But unlike him, I had to keep my feelings of relief *and* frustration completely hidden.

We were exhausted when we got back to the *Starfall*, but we still had to clean up after our own crew had served themselves from the pots of stew we'd left out. We also heard a few grumblings from the crew towards us about having to serve themselves simple bowls of stew, as if that was our fault! I hate people, sometimes.

But as we cleaned, we could at least finally talk.

"I didn't overhear anything interesting at my table," I said.

"I tried to listen to Captain Jefferson," Rex said. "I heard her say *Starfall*, but I couldn't make out anything else. But whatever Project Avalance is, she's really excited about it."

"Course she is," Shelandra said. She was being kind enough to help us clean, though she didn't have to. "No one's gonna thumb their nose at a plan from the top brass."

"Yeah, but I didn't feel like she was faking it," Rex said.

Jerry wandered in about the time the cleaning was almost finished. (He never struck me as the cleaning kind.) "Evenin', gents," he said. "You get blinded by all the medals on all those uniforms?" He collapsed into a seat and propped his feet on a table.

"Banquets better not be a custom after every colony world takeover," I said sourly.

With a frown, Shelandra playfully waved Jerry's boots off the table. "I just cleaned that," she muttered.

"We didn't get blinded, but we heard some things," Vance said. "Nothing new, just strong confirmation of what you've already told us."

I told Jerry about the binders and the loose talk. He listened thoughtfully.

"Huh. Maybe you *want* them to have a banquet every time they knock over a fruit stand. Sounds like a great way to get info eventually."

"Or die tryin'," I said.

"Speaking of info, how're you making out?" Rex asked.

Jerry sighed. "Slower than molasses in January. Because of the extra eyes and checkups they have on me, I can barely bring up a work schedule without a red alert. They're really breathin' down my neck. I'm startin' to think we should investigate in non-electronic ways."

"Like what?" Shelandra asked. Finally finished cleaning, we all gratefully sat.

Jerry looked at all of us appraisingly, took a deep breath, and said quietly, "Like maybe breaking into Captain Jefferson's office while she's away."

None of us spoke for about a minute.

Shelandra finally said, "As MP, I'm the one least likely to be suspicious if I'm found in there. Tell me what to do."

"We'll need to establish a timetable, first," Jerry said. "Watch her enough to find a reasonably certain time she'll be gone for a while." He looked at all of us meaningfully. "If we do this, it's the big time, and pardon me for plantin' my flag, but I'm in charge. This isn't egging a police car and running

away. We need to think like thieves. *Professional* thieves."

"I despise keeping secrets from friends," I said. "But we do *not* tell Veronica and Janice. We already know the admiralty has legal charges planned for them, so they need to remain innocent."

"Veronica and Janice are our only hope for learning the captain's schedule," Jerry said. "And since they're foreigners with targets on their backs *anyway*, do you really think being innocent of this scheme will save them if we're caught?"

I thought long and hard. I wanted so badly to smash his argument to pieces, but I had nothing.

"Their lives are bound up in all this more than ours," Vance said. "Their names were the ones mentioned in the files Jerry found. It's only right they should participate in their own defense. And they would want to."

I nodded. "All right. I understand. But we won't pressure them. If they feel too unsafe to do it, then we don't do it."

"Agreed," Jerry said.

With perfect timing, Veronica and Janice chose that moment to walk in. They were dressed normally.

"Hey, gang," Veronica said.

"You already ditch the dress uniforms?" Shelandra asked with a smile.

Janice rolled her eyes. "Ugh. That, and the two vice admirals trying to chat us up once they found enough liquid courage."

"Blech!" Shelandra said, making a face.

I gave them a surprised look as they sat. "What'd they do? Do I need to put on a mask and secretly bust someone's head?!"

"Nah, calm down, hero," Veronica said.
"They didn't get handsy, just obnoxious."

"Did you happen to learn anything about Project Avalanche during the banquet?" Rex asked. "It was one of the hot topics of the night, apparently."

"We only heard the phrase a couple times," Janice said.

"But I swear some people gave us some funny looks from across the room after they opened their binders," Veronica said.

"They did," Janice said. "We weren't imagining it. Have you guys found out anything more?"

"We haven't," Rex said. He looked around the group solemnly. "And that leads us to a proposal."

Rex and I quietly told Veronica and Janice what we heard at the banquet. Then we told them Jerry's idea to take our investigation to the next level. To the next *big* level.

They didn't hesitate.

"I'm in," Janice said.

"Yeah," Veronica said. "We already know we're gonna be sacrificed on fake charges in some stupid scheme, so we have nothing to lose."

"Then the next step is up to you," Jerry told them. "Be super casual. Find out the captain's schedule without making it look like you're observing."

"And since you're already a mild security threat, being from a foreign empire, that'll be even harder than usual," Shelandra said.

"We can do it," Janice said, with absolute conviction.

Rex and I shared a smile. *Our girls!* I thought. *They're awesome!*

"I believe in our chances of success," Vance said. "After all, we successfully completed one mission tonight."

"What was that?" Shelandra asked.

"We served a banquet on the flagship without embarrassing the captain," Vance said. "I confess, I had my doubts we could do that. But having done that, I feel we can do *anything*."