

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 22

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Weather Report: 3501-02

When it came to detail, I thought Jerry was a fanatic back when he devised our cover stories for data manipulation.

Yeah, I hadn't seen anything, yet.

Jerry went all *Mission Impossible* on us, devising subtle hand signals and strict rules governing which of us could go near Captain Jefferson's ready room, and when. (News flash: Rex, Vance, and I were still bound to the kitchen.)

But I only heard a single complaint. Rex snorted and rolled his eyes, just once. Jerry stared him down and very pointedly said, "*They will kill us if we're caught*. I'm not dying because you screw this up."

As much as we all hated it, he was right.

Phase 1 involved Veronica and Janice noting Captain Jefferson's movements as meticulously as possible for at least a week, preferably two. We were looking for patterns with a reliability of greater than 80%. I'm not sure where Jerry got his 80% requirement; it was either from a secret thieves' guild book or he pulled it out of his ear.

We were ten days into this mighty plan when Shelandra said screw it and burgled the captain's ready room.

Sometimes...we just really don't do *plans*.

But in Shelandra's defense, she had a really good reason for going off script: the

universe went off script, first, in the form of a random attack from RingForge, an empire we'd never heard of until today.

They popped into the system with a fleet about two-thirds the size of ours. Our best guess is that they came to knock off the colony just like we had, and hadn't been expecting us.

Our fleet climbed out of orbit and scrambled into a proper defensive arrangement, and fought for about five hours. Shelandra and Vance went to their battle stations, which was confinement in Vance's quarters. Rex and I went to our battle stations at the hospital, where we sat idle throughout the entire fight. Five hours later, Benevolence, Ltd. had scrapped out a win.

Knowing Captain Jefferson would never leave the bridge during a battle, and knowing that she herself would not be missed for a long time, Shelandra pounced on the opportunity. Risking her life, she told Vance to sit tight and went AWOL for about thirty minutes.

Stunned, the rest of us learned all this while assembled alone in the mess hall after dinner.

"Oh, my gosh!" Rex exclaimed. "I'm so glad you didn't get caught!"

"Well, me too, obviously," Shelandra said.

"Me three!" I said. I was shaking at just hearing what she'd done.

"Me and all of us!" Janice said. "Veronica and I are the ones in danger, and you took a huge risk...for us!"

Shelandra was genuinely surprised at this gratitude. "Well, hey..." she said. "You're friends. And friends have each other's backs."

Veronica and Janice smiled.

I noticed Jerry looking at Shelandra with more care and concern than I would have given him credit for. He seemed immensely relieved that she was all right. I suddenly wondered if he just didn't know how to say it.

"So what did you find?" Vance asked.

"I found the Project Avalanche binder right away," Shelandra said. "I took the pages out and ran them through a scanner, and hid the file in a random system folder. I put the binder back exactly where I found it.

"I also went through the captain's computer, all her mail and documents. But I couldn't find anything! I searched on *Avalanche*, but nothing came up, which is really strange! I searched for *Veronica* and *Janice*, and I saw a lot of routine stuff – they don't trust you, by the way, but we knew that – but nothing about any plans. I don't understand it, because you'd think Captain Jefferson and the other officers would have been discussing it." She shook her head. "But nothing."

"Documents and mail flagged as top secret are stored using a different mechanism," Jerry said. "And you probably would have needed the captain's password to see them."

Shelandra made a face. "That would explain it. However, I did see other confidential stuff. Major Carpenter got busted for having an affair with Sergeant Peterson!"

"Old news," Rex said.

"Yeah, the whole ship knows that," I said.

Shelandra looked exasperated. "Well, obviously, *I'm* out of the loop."

"MPs are the enemy," Jerry said with a small smile. "No one tells you pigs anything."

Shelandra stuck her tongue out at him.

"So that leaves the binder," Vance said. "What did it say?"

"No idea," Shelandra said.

"You didn't read it?" Veronica asked.

"No time. This was a dump and run. I started the scan, then searched the computer while the scanner did its thing. I couldn't tell what was going on with the battle, so for all I knew, the captain would be back any moment."

"Didn't you read the file later, when you were back in Vance's quarters?" I asked.

"Using what terminal?" Shelandra asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said. Vance was a prisoner. He had no computer access.

"Besides, I wanted to get Jerry's advice before any of us even touch that file," Shelandra said.

"Good! Call!" Jerry said emphatically.

"We have to open it," Rex said.

"Yeah, but let's do it once," Jerry said. "We memorize what we need, then delete it. And we can't use my terminal, or Veronica or Janice's, as we're monitored." He looked at me and Rex. "We'll use yours, and we might as well do it now."

The kitchen had an office barely big enough for one person, squeezed between the walk-in freezer and the exit. Other than having a terminal so we could read each day's propaganda – oh, sorry, *announcements* – it was useless as far as Rex and I were concerned.

Jerry squeezed into the seat and we gathered around the doorway as best we could. Shelandra told Jerry where she'd put the file. He opened it and began to read.

The silence was frustrating.

I was about to ask if he would kindly tell us *what* he was reading when he let out a heavy sigh.

"All right, folks," he said. "I got good news and bad news."

"Bad news first, please," Vance said.

"We all know the alliance between Benevolence and Heart of Fire won't last," Jerry said. "So they've planned for it. As soon as the R&D nerds find a way to boost our firepower and shields, all our ships will get upgrades. Then, whenever it's most convenient, they're going to quote-unquote *catch* Veronica and Janice spying on our upgrades and sending those secrets back to their empire. It's a false flag to justify betraying Heart of Fire. After a short trial, Veronica and Janice will be executed."

"Oh, that's just lovely!" Janice said. Veronica sighed and looked at the floor, as if she was suddenly exhausted.

"That's why they call it Project Avalanche, by the way," Jerry said. "The supposed betrayal from Veronica and Janice will be a small event which sets in motion larger and larger events. Whoever wrote this document actually went out of their way to explain that in the introduction. They were really proud of it. Thought it was clever."

"Soooooooooooo...the good news?" I asked.

"They're incompetent," Jerry said. "R&D is way behind schedule. They had originally intended to arrest Veronica and Janice when we reached John's World, but that's been scrapped. Now it's TBD."

Rex said, "As good news goes, that's...mediocre."

Jerry just looked at him. "Beggars, something something, choosers. Anyway, anyone who wants to view this file, do so now. As is typical of our dear leaders, it's mostly rah-rah propaganda and show, very light on any actual plans or data. Which is very telling in and of itself."

We took turns looking through the file, but it was just as Jerry said. I spent some time holding Veronica. She was gutted. So was Janice. It's not every day you find you've been targeted for death.

And to be targeted so callously and indifferently. To be reminded of how insignificant your existence is to the people in charge. Just a playing piece on a game board, not an actual living being.

It made me so sick.

"We should remember that these plans are fluid," Rex said. "If R&D takes too long and they need to start their avalanche, they'll find a way to make it happen."

"It could happen at any time," Vance agreed.

"I have no idea what we're going to do," Shelandra said quietly.

"I don't, either," I said, but I was filled with a sudden do-or-die conviction. "But I know that *somehow*, we'll beat this!"