

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 23

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Weather Report: 3501-03

I sat alone at a viewport in the empty mess hall, enjoying a coffee and the long quiet between lunch and dinner. This viewport faced the planet we were orbiting, so I watched the drop ships fire engines against their orbital velocity and let gravity slowly pull them dirtside. Due to the RingForge attack, the Brass had gotten cold feet and delayed their drop by a fortnight, but they finally had the OK to proceed.

I thought about all the people on those ships, and on the other ships in the fleet, and wondered if their lives were simpler than mine. A good many probably were. I'd be hard pressed to find another person who was friends with three foreigners traveling alongside them, while committing felonies to save two of those friends from a conspiracy concocted by their own admiralty.

And I'd be hard pressed to find many people who would even understand.

I took a sip of coffee, savored it. When things are grim, you relish the simple joys.

Any simple joy.

Rex, Vance, and Shelandra joined me. This spot had become our afternoon spot, our tiny oasis in a desert of madness. Our afternoon conversations would probably be good memories if it weren't for the circumstances.

Rex sank into a chair and propped his feet on a table. "Any ideas?" he asked me.

I continued staring out the viewport. "Nnnnnnope."

"What if Veronica and Janice formally defected and applied for sanctuary?" Shelandra asked.

"How would that save them from being framed?" Rex asked.

"Well, wouldn't they be removed from a military environment altogether?" Shelandra asked. "I don't know what happens to asylum seekers, but I figure they're put in a special house somewhere, or something. But no one could accuse them of spying when they're not in a position to spy."

"I'm not sure we even take asylum seekers any more," I said. "And if we do, I'm certain we don't treat them well."

"And since the charges will be manufactured anyway, further lies would be no problem," Vance said. "Veronica and Janice could have a dozen holy men swear they have an alibi. It would make no difference. The story will be what the admiralty needs it to be."

We sat in a mostly comfortable silence for a while, as it felt trite to talk about anything else. I kept coming up with, then dismissing, one idea after another, each more outlandish than the last.

The red alert smashed into our senses. Throughout the ship came the sound of people running to battle stations, but I just sat there thinking, Oh, what now?

At Rex's urging, I hauled myself to my feet and followed him to the hospital at a light jog.

One of the weird things about battle is never knowing how long it will last, especially when you don't have a porthole to let you see the situation. Starfall was rattled by an explosion about half an hour into the battle, then really rocked by a massive explosion about an hour after that. Felt like maybe a magazine blew, and that's super bad.

The injured flowed in. Rex and I did our jobs on adrenaline, and time lost meaning as every moment was the same as the last.

Then we saw Veronica come in on a stretcher, her clothes torn and bloody. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing.

I started to cry out, but Rex gripped my arm and shook his head. The doctors immediately attended to her (fortunately, they showed no bias to a patient based on her nationality). I knew Rex was right; there was nothing I could do.

Somehow, finally, the action and the adrenaline petered out after about ten straight hours, and we went to yellow alert. I wanted to see Veronica, but we were still in a state of emergency and we all had to do our duty.

Rex and I trudged back to the mess hall to find it completely undamaged. Shelandra and Vance joined us a few minutes later. We heated two big vats of stew and fed a weary crew at about 0200. They would expect breakfast on time, so Rex and I would get little rest that night.

As our shipmates came through the line, we learned what happened.

Bizarrely, it was RingForge again. They attacked with a fleet a little bigger than the last one, and I heard later it was practically

a coin toss to determine a winner, which, by the hair of our chinny chin chin, was us.

Our own fleet was a lot smaller when the dust finally cleared. Starfall had indeed blown a magazine and was lucky to still be intact. The Heir Apparent was beat up, but it was big enough to take it.

Most conversations we heard were expressions of utter bafflement. Why attack us with separate fleets a fortnight apart, and lose each? If the two fleets had attacked together, we would have been obliterated and they would have hardly been scratched. A few junior officers surmised that the RingForge emperor had bungled something badly; there really was no other explanation.

Would that be the winner of this stupid war? Whoever was least dumb in an idiot contest?

We also learned something mildly irritating: the wardroom had been destroyed, so all officers would be eating in the mess with the common folk from now on. Joy. Rex and I were told to partition an area at one end of the mess hall. We weren't told how to do this, just to do it.

We started cleaning up the stew and washing all dishes at 0300 and finished by 0400. We turned two tables on their sides to create the illusion of a partition (you could see over them just fine, so it was ridiculous). We started making breakfast at 0500. We got a quick nap after breakfast.

So it was the afternoon before I could visit Veronica, but it turned out I didn't have to. She and Janice visited the mess hall during our afternoon down time. Veronica was limping but looked mostly okay, if really haggard. I hugged her hard.

Jerry wasn't there, as he was still on duty. The rest of us sat in our usual spot and heard Veronica's tale.

"We're supposed to be confined to quarters during a battle," she said. "But the first explosion hit so near to us that our room started filling with smoke and we had to leave. We tried to help out wherever we could. Then a lieutenant saw us and actually ordered us back to our quarters!"

"Oh, my goodness!" Shelandra said in disgust.

"We told him our quarters were full of smoke, so he escorted us to the bridge and told us to stay out of the way," Janice said. "We told him we were willing to do anything to help, but he said, no, we had to stay there."

"So we just sat in the back of the bridge, feeling stupid," Veronica said. "Then a missile hit the bridge and a five-foot hole opened into space."

"What?!" Rex asked. The rest of us gaped at her in amazement.

"The starboard bulkhead blew out!" Janice said. "Communications and the secondary helmsman were sucked into space immediately. And the hatches didn't shut!"

Everyone on board knew that in the case of a hull breach, all nearby hatches were to seal immediately. You just hoped you weren't on the wrong side when they slammed shut.

"Starfall started hemorrhaging air," Veronica said. "Captain Jefferson was hanging on for dear life, but she wasn't going to last more than a few seconds because she was losing her grip. Janice took hold of a rail and grabbed the captain's hand, and I just started spraying canisters of sealant at the breach."

Each room which bordered space had sealant canisters on the wall, next to the fire extinguishers. The canisters were

designed for small hull breaks, maybe a foot wide at most.

"Sealant cans weren't designed for a breach that big!" Rex exclaimed.

"Yeah, but I didn't know what else to do," Veronica said. "And we got lucky, because a strip of metal from one of the control panels, and a metal bar, and a few other things hit the walls and got stuck there, across the opening. That bit of junk wouldn't have saved the captain if Janice had let go, but it was good enough to give the sealant something to hang onto, eventually."

"I just kept pulling the pin on one canister after another and spraying everything it had. I think there were four. Whatever, I used them all. The breach finally sealed enough that only a tiny bit of air was escaping, and we weren't in immediate danger."

"Starfall kept fighting," Janice said. "It took emergency crews several minutes to arrive. When they did, they took care of the rest of the breach."

We were completely gobsmacked.

"Oh, my gosh!" Shelandra said. "So you saved the Captain's life!"

"Probably the entire ship!" I said. "Without command, the enemy would have blown us to pieces!"

"About fifteen minutes after that, one of the magazines blew," Janice said. "Part of the bridge caved in. That's when Veronica was hurt. When they took her away on a stretcher, I wanted to go with her, but they wouldn't let me."

"Wow!" Rex said. "What did the captain say after the battle was over?"

"I didn't give her a chance to say anything," Janice said. "The first moment I could, I hightailed it out of there to check on Veronica. The captain's been so busy with repairs and reports, she hasn't spoken to us since."

"Wow!" Rex said again, but this time with hostility.

Veronica shrugged. "It's no biggie. She really is swamped right now, and we don't need her to talk to us anyway."

"Yeah, we're just glad to still be breathing," Janice said.

"Me too," I said, with feeling.

"I'm so glad the hatches failed!" Rex said. "I owe the maintenance crew free beer for life!"

"I gotta wonder, though," Shelandra said, and looked at Veronica and Janice. "Will this change their plans for you?"

Veronica shrugged. "Don't see why it would."

"I dunno," Shelandra said thoughtfully. "It's hard to betray someone who saved your life, your ship, and your command."