

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 8

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Weather Report: 3500-08

Colonizer 4's route back to the homeworld would almost take it through the same systems Rex and I scouted on the way out. We set out immediately, leaving the colonizers from Still Standing and Heart of Fire behind to glare at each other.

I sat by the window, looking out into the empty blackness of space, trying hard not to see it as a metaphor for my life. Since I was literally looking at the entire universe, I'm pretty sure I failed.

Rex, lying on his bunk, said, "I've been thinking."

"That's your first mistake."

"CC sent us in a straight line as far as possible from the homeworld. No one else, just us. We hit three systems. We never charted the third because we never got a chance, and that system was *52 sectors* away! That system's practically on the Heart of Fire's front porch, and there are over 30 systems closer to our homeworld than that one. But CC sent a colonizer straight to that system *anyway*, with *no protection*, and with *no survey data*. Why?!"

I shrugged. "They're stupid?"

"No. Well, yes, they are, but not like that." Rex shook his head. "Any colony we set up there would be destroyed before they could take their first shower. CC knows that. Ergo, they never intended to colonize that system in the first place."

"Snot-Nose wants colonies like a baby wants candy," I said scornfully. "That

makes colonizers precious assets, and there are over a hundred people aboard this ship. There's *no way* CC would ever pull this ship off colonization duties and send it 52 sectors into the unknown for the sole purpose of bringing home a couple of privates."

"I agree. But that's exactly what they did."

I wanted so badly to tell him he was wrong, but I had nothing.

I said, "Admiral Brighton's daughter must have fallen in love with me and pleaded for my return."

"Are you competing with CC for the Stupid Award?"

"When all other explanations have been eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the answer."

"We haven't eliminated all other explanations. We just don't have enough information. There's a difference."

"But my explanation is a happy one."

"Which is why it can't possibly be true."

The intercom buzzed. "Storm. Callahan. Get your butts to the bridge."

I gave a weary salute to the speaker, and Rex and I obeyed. Thirty seconds later we were on the bridge, at attention in front of the commander, who seemed to like us less than he did the first time. Which is impressive. The support crew manning their stations studiously ignored us.

"Our orders have changed," the commander said. "We're to rendezvous

with the *Starfall* in the next system. The *Starfall* is our newest and best destroyer, and both of you will transfer aboard to become ships' cooks!" He glared at us with a face that could have made stars go nova. "I don't know whose ass you kissed, or who you're blackmailing, but I have never had a worse assignment than carting you two babies to your safe, cushy little job!"

"Feeling's mutual, sir," I said. "I'd rather be back on our scout ship, myself, instead of on this dump truck." I at least had the decency to remain at attention and continue staring straight ahead as I said it.

Everyone froze. Beside me, I knew Rex was successfully fighting back a grin.

The commander slowly stood and put his face inches from mine. "Is that so, private?" he whispered. "Are you so sure about that?"

I squinted. Something about his eyes told me not to answer that.

"Your precious scout ship was destroyed two hours ago," he whispered. "Two good men just died in your place, and I will never know why. Now. Get. Off. My. Bridge!"

Rex and I solemnly saluted and left. If the commander's objective had been to crush my insubordination, he had done a superb job.

We returned to our quarters and resumed the same positions we were in before. I stared out the window. Rex stared at the ceiling. We both felt about as tall as microbes.

"You're right," I finally said, watching my reflection in the window. "We don't have enough information."

I turned to face Rex. "The commander is also right. He'll never know why we were transferred. But we will. We will find out."

Rex nodded, his face and his heart as set as mine.