

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 17

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Weather Report: 3500-14

Part 2

We made it to that blessed afternoon dead time between lunch and dinner, the only real break a cook has all day. Jerry, Vance, Rex, Veronica, and Janice sat around a couple of tables in the mess hall with bottles of beer we weren't supposed to have, watching Shelandra and I pick up olives and toothpicks. That was our punishment for being the ones who wanted them.

I said, "Okay, I get that no one on the ship, and I mean absolutely no one, besides me and Shelandra like little olives on toothpicks. But why do they have to leave them on the tables or toss them on the floor? A naval crew is supposed to have outstanding cleanliness!"

Shelandra developed a sudden melodramatic coughing fit.

"Okay, I mean besides me and Rex!" I said. "We're always the exceptions. I hold my shipmates to a higher standard!"

"So how'd you two wind up here?" Rex asked Janice.

Veronica and Janice hadn't had time to stick around earlier, as they had dropped in briefly only as part of their introduction to the ship, and we'd had to start serving lunch. They had returned afterward, and we'd properly introduced everyone.

"Part of the treaty between our empires was to exchange personnel," Janice said. "They asked for volunteers, so we jumped at the chance at seeing you guys again."

They *jumped* at the chance?! My little heart went flip flop.

"Our official titles are *liaison officers*," Veronica said. "But really, we're spies. Just like the people your empire sent to ours."

"In preparation for the day our empires stab each other in the back?" Jerry asked.

"Basically," Janice said.

"Dammit," I said. "I was going to show you ladies the menu for the next week, but now I can't trust you with it."

"We'll worm it out of you eventually," Veronica said with a smile.

Shelandra and I threw away the final bits of trash, washed up, grabbed beers for ourselves, and joined the others.

"So what now?" Rex asked.

"Lie low and hope this stupid war comes to an end," Janice said, tilting her head back in exasperation.

"No change there, then," I said. "But do you know anything we need to know?"

Janice and Veronica glanced at each other for just a moment.

“Just rumors,” Veronica said. “Take them for what they’re worth. As best we can tell, *Heart of Fire* is winning this farce, and *Benevolence* owes us big for pulling its ass out of the fire. We’ve targeted *Still Standing* as the weakest of the herd – sorry, Vance...”

Vance just gave a resigned shrug.

“...so they want to pick off *Still Standing*’s colonies one by one and add their production to ours.”

“But they’re gonna get *Benevolence* to do most of the dirty work,” Jerry said, seeing where this was going.

“Right,” Janice said grimly. “If these rumors are true, you guys are about to see a lot more action while our fleet hangs back in a...” she made air quotes “...*supporting role*.”

“That means you made a dangerous move coming here,” Shelandra said.

Veronica shrugged. “Yeah, but...we really don’t have many friends we can talk to like this. Jake and Rex were nice, and *real*. We never forgot them, so we chose this.”

Janice said, “And when everything goes belly up between our empires, maybe we could be in a position to help each other, just like you’re helping Vance.”

“Ambitious plan,” Vance said. “I heartily support it.”

“You say *Still Standing* is the weakest,” Rex said. “But they were kicking our ass when your fleet showed up.”

“We don’t know the details, just the rumors,” Janice said. “Maybe you have more than one fleet, while that was the only fleet *Still Standing* had. Maybe your empires are equal and we flipped a coin to

choose a treaty with you.” She raised her hands in a *hell-if-I-know* gesture.

“How long do you think our treaty will last?” I asked.

“Probably a while,” Veronica said. “*Still Standing*’s sure to have at least half a dozen colonies, and it takes a fair bit of effort to conquer even one and take its resources.”

Jerry downed the rest of his beer and stood up. “My shift starts in a couple hours. Which means...” He looked at Shelandra. “All flirting aside, you and I need to make damned sure your handiwork won’t be found, and we need to do that now. No offense, but you’re an amateur and you made mistakes.”

“None taken, and you’re right,” Shelandra said, getting up also.

“What handiwork is this?” Veronica asked.

Shelandra hesitated, then said, “Jake and Rex will tell you.”

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Shelandra said. “It’s fine.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to leave Vance unattended, MP Pellardini,” Rex said.

“I’m not, *Private Callahan*, so we’ll be as quick as we can. If anyone asks, I got sick and I’m stuck in the head.”

Jerry and Shelandra headed off. I called after them, “You could at least throw your bottles away. Cleanliness, remember?”

Without turning, Shelandra just waved her hand and said, “You can take care of it. That’s what kitchen staff are for.” Then, giggling, she ran out the door.