

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 18

Douglas Neman

Weather Report: 3500-15

It was Jerry who saved us.

He insisted we all memorize the same story:

- 1) Jerry broke into the database to give himself extra food rations. This was the *entire extent* of his illegal activities.
- 2) Rex and I were innocent. We thought his extra steak orders came from Captain Jefferson as a reward for some kind of good behavior.
- 3) Shelandra was extremely upset because her transfer to a destroyer put her in more danger and away from the position for which she had diligently trained. She was also livid because her transfer to MP duties was essentially a demotion with a loss of pay. She thought her transfer was a result of Admiral Brighton's displeasure with her work, and would be relieved to discover otherwise, then suspicious that someone else arranged it out of professional jealousy. However, she would be a model soldier and take one for the team by not demanding the transfer be reversed.

Wow. Although I've long been a fan of getting stories straight, even I rolled my eyes at how much detail Jerry went into, and how much he insisted we repeat it. I thought he was being paranoid.

"Are we *expecting* trouble?" I asked him when he visited me and Rex in the kitchen.

"Sooner or later, someone on the *Heir Apparent* will miss Shelandra and ask where she is," Jerry said. "When her transfer is discovered, people may shrug and move on. But if even one person asks *why*, they will discover her orders are fake. There is no getting around that."

"Jerry," I said. "Have you *seen* the bureaucracy in our navy? You could put a uniform on a kangaroo and stick it on the bridge, and no one would notice unless it wore stripes."

"Never underestimate what a bureaucrat will stick his nose into," Jerry said.

"But what does Shelandra's transfer have to do with your extra food?" Rex asked.

Jerry spread his arms wide. "Not to toot my own horn, but I am kind of famous to these folks. A single bit goes out of place, I'm already the prime suspect."

But 48 hours passed with no trouble, so I began to relax.

The only nuisance I had to deal with was a flash of fame and adulation: news traveled fast that Private Storm had captured an enemy soldier on the flagship. Since I had no business being on the flagship in the first place, I had to devise a cover, which was that during shore leave I had held a friend's credit chips while they went dancing, forgot to give them back, and made a quick dash to the *Heir Apparent* to return them.

Shelandra and I never mentioned the fact we had been friends long before she

transferred to the *Starfall* with Vance; we had enough problems already. And we kept Vance in the kitchen so the crew wouldn't take their rage out on him.

Two days after I thought we were in the clear, the investigators came without warning at 0800. Two men, an ensign and a lieutenant junior grade, wanted to know who had faked a transfer from Admiral Brighton. They questioned me, Rex, Jerry, and Shelandra separately.

Rex and I were detained only a few minutes each, and we stuck with our stories. And I discovered something amazing: no one believes privates are capable of anything besides grunt work and following orders. Our rank, more than anything, made us credible, because mere privates could not possibly be smart enough to break into a fortune cookie, much less a database.

When I asked the investigators which department they worked in, they ignored me as if I hadn't spoken. Okay, fine. Hint taken.

Shelandra told us later that she played her part: outrage and despondency at the sudden transfer. She'd even managed to fight back some tears of betrayal, abandonment, and a wrecked career path, for which the investigators had the sympathy of a brick.

Jerry told us later they weren't true investigators, they were low-level computer geeks. Our personal interviews were merely a procedural requirement, but these two guys really didn't know how to question people. True investigators would have looked at the prior relationships of everyone involved and figured everything out in about a hundredth of a second, but these guys didn't know how to look beyond anything digital. If a user ID and a time stamp told them nothing, they knew nothing.

Also, the fleet was still scrambling to rebuild after the attack, and all upper-level IT and engineering people were desperately pouring resources into tech improvement, as Still Standing's superior firepower had badly shaken the top brass. Investigating a minor data breach which ended up being only about food and a bizarre demotion was the least of their worries. The investigators wrapped by 0930, lost interest in Shelandra, and recommended a wrist-slap for Jerry, who was promptly pardoned due to his heroic actions during the battle.

"Even so, they must still be concerned that someone issued an order pretending to be Admiral Brighton," I said later, when we were all gathered in the otherwise-empty mess hall after breakfast. All the gang was there: me, Rex, Vance, Shelandra, Jerry, Veronica, and Janice.

"Probably," Jerry said. "But they have no reason to believe it's Shelandra because they see no motive. Same reason they have no reason to believe it's me. When they make their report, their superiors will probably put it down to someone on Brighton's team getting rid of Shelandra in a cut-throat career move and they'll forget about it."

"What did you do, anyway?" Shelandra asked. "I thought you were going to cover my tracks completely."

"It's impossible to cover them, so I muddied them beyond almost all recognition," Jerry said. "I figured they'd come chat with me eventually, so I intentionally outed myself as a food-manipulator, because anyone who's an amateur at something that simple couldn't possibly have done the bigger stuff which took way more skill. It's a classic double-bluff. But I scrambled the pointers on the records you messed with, plus about a hundred other random ones as red herrings. Nothing that'll cause any danger, just a little confusion. As far the

investigators are concerned, your transfer order came from lab rats.”

“Pardon?” Veronica asked.

“Lab rats,” Jerry repeated. “There’s a lab on our home world where the scientists actually set the rats up with their own user ID in the system. They did it so they could order supplies for the rats, and any such orders from that ID would automatically bill a special account, so they did it for bureaucratic reasons only.” Jerry smiled. “But the little buggers somehow got out of their cages and started issuing transfer orders. Imagine that. They also ordered two pounds of cheddar, six boxes of crackers, and a case of wine, and labeled the delivery Priority 1!” He smirked, and took a swig of the beer it was completely against the rules for him to have.

We all chuckled.

“Well, thank you for all of that,” I said. “We couldn’t have done any of this without you, and hopefully, this closes the books on this entire affair.”

Jerry nodded. “It should do exactly that.”

“Except no more extra steaks for you,” Rex said. “Captain Jefferson explicitly told us to watch out for you and to report any more attempts to get extra food.”

“Which means you gave that up to help us,” I said.

Jerry shrugged. “Eh. The food was nice while it lasted, but I was glad to help. You guys are good to me, and... you’re my friends.”

The rest of us smiled at this. It was a nice moment, all around.

Jerry finished his beer and set it on the table with a deliberate *thunk*. “But here’s the deal,” he said, suddenly serious. “That

lab back on the homeworld is just one part of a larger R&D center. A big one. And while I was having fun with the critters, showering them with extra cheese (which they totally deserve)...I found something else.” He looked concerned. “To make sure no one was investigating me even as I poked around – because that’s a scary moment, when you realize the people you’re looking at are looking straight back at you – I searched for any files with certain key words. And I found a folder called *Starfall – Project Avalanche*. Well, of course I took a look, didn’t I?”

“And?” Rex asked.

“It was full of computer code files, about fifty, written in a language I confess I’ve never seen. I had to open them as text, which meant most of it was gobbledygook. But I could make out a few things. I saw references to *Starfall*, Captain Jefferson, a few other officers, the word *avalanche* a few times, something called John’s World...and I saw references to Veronica and Janice.”

Veronica and Janice sat up, looking concerned.

Jerry continued. “I saw the words *experimental*, *expendable*...and a section about assigning Veronica and Janice a couple of pre-selected JAGs who wouldn’t fight their charges very hard.”

“What charges?!” Janice asked.

“Dunno. I couldn’t tell. These were just words and partial phrases buried in the junk.”

“Can we see the files?” Shelandra asked.

Jerry shook his head. “I had a choice to make. I could muddy our tracks, or I could copy those files. I couldn’t do both. Copying would have left a trail, because that kind of information is kept in an

operating system database I can't access, and I couldn't take the risk. And now that they know about my activities, I dare not dive in again. I have nothing to give you except the few things I saw. I don't know what any of it means, but it didn't look good."

"I can tell you one piece of the puzzle," Vance said. "John's World is a Still Standing colony. I'm the scout who mapped it."

"Then it should have been called Vance's World," I said.

"I wouldn't object," Vance said. "But our emperor named it after the singer who wrote the song our empire is named after. I'm not sure how the singer feels about that, but that's how it goes."

"Why would a Still Standing colony world we've never been to – never even *heard* of – be named in a bunch of files about this ship?" Rex asked.

Shelandra said, "Well, we know we're about to start knocking off Still Standing colony worlds, doing the grunt work in our alliance with Heart of Fire. We're headed for the first one as soon as repairs are complete."

"How many colony worlds are we talking about?" Rex asked.

"Maybe half a dozen," Janice said. "But I don't know which one we're headed to first."

"But that doesn't tell us what any of this means," Veronica said nervously.

"It means you two are pawns in a game our top brass is playing," I said, smoldering with anger. "We can't see the game, or what it's for. Yet. But..."

"But they've got something planned when this ship enters orbit over John's World," Jerry said. "Something bad. And we've got

to figure out what that is before we get there."